

Johnston Annie Fellows

Aunt 'Liza's Hero, and Other Stories



Annie Johnston

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Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| ACKNOWLEDGMENT | 5 |
| AUNT 'LIZA'S HERO | 6 |
| THE CAPTAIN'S CELEBRATION | 11 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 13 |

Johnston Annie F. Annie Fellows Aunt 'Liza's Hero, and Other Stories

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

These stories first appeared in the *Youth's Companion*. The author wishes to acknowledge the courtesy of the editors in permitting her to republish them in the present volume.

Messrs. L. C. Page and Company wish also to acknowledge the courtesy of the editors in granting them permission to use the original illustrations.

AUNT 'LIZA'S HERO

Aunt 'Liza Barnes leaned over the front gate at the end of the garden path, and pulled her black sunbonnet farther over her wrinkled face to shade her dim eyes from the glare of the morning sun. Something unusual was happening down the street, judging from the rapidly approaching noise and dust.

Aunt 'Liza had been weeding her little vegetable garden at the back of the house when she first heard the confused shouting of many voices. She thought it was a runaway, and hurried to the gate as fast as her rheumatic joints would allow.

Runaway teams had often startled the sleepy streets of this little Indiana village, but never before had such a wild procession raced through its thoroughfares. Two well-grown calves dashed past, dragging behind them an overturned, home-made cart, to which they were harnessed by pieces of clothes-lines and rusty trace-chains.

Behind them came a breathless crowd of shouting boys and barking dogs. They were gasping in the heat and the clouds of yellow dust their feet had kicked up. Aunt 'Liza's black sunbonnet leaned farther over the gate as she called shrilly to the boy who brought up the rear, "What's the matter, Ben?"

The boy dropped out of the race and came back and leaned against the fence, still grinning.

"Running isn't much in my line," he panted, as he wiped his fat, freckled face on his shirtsleeve. "But it was too funny to see them calves kick up their heels and light out. One is Joe Meadows's and one is Jeff Whitman's. They're broke in to work single, and pull all right that way. But the boys took a notion to make 'em work double. This is the first time they've tried it. Put bits in their mouths, too, and drive 'em with reins like horses. My! But didn't they go lickety-split!"

Aunt 'Liza chuckled. Seventy-five years had made her bent and feeble, but her sense of fun and her sympathies were still fresh and quick. Every boy in the place felt that she was his friend.

In her tumble-down cottage on the outskirts of the town she lived alone, excepting when her drunken, thriftless son Henry came back to be taken care of awhile. She supported herself by selling vegetables, chickens, and eggs.

Most people had forgotten that she had once lived in much better circumstances. Whatever longings she may have had for the prosperity of her early days, no one knew about them. Perhaps it was because she never talked of herself, and was so ready to listen to the complaints of others, that everybody went to her with their troubles.

The racing calves soon came to a halt. In a few minutes the procession came back, and halted quietly in front of the little garden gate. Jeff was leading the calves, which looked around with mild, reproachful eyes, as if wondering at the disturbance.

"Aunt 'Liza," said Jeff, "can you lend me a strap or something? The reins broke. That's how they happened to get away from me."

"You can take the rope hanging up in the well-shed if you'll bring it back before night."

"All right, Aunt 'Liza. I'll do as much for you some day. Just look at Daisy and Bolivar! We're going to take them to the fair next fall, and enter them as the fastest trotting calves on record."

"Boys are such harum-scarum creatures," said the old woman, as she bent painfully over her weeding again. "Likely enough Jeff'll never think of that rope another time."

But after dinner, as she sat out on a bench by the back door, smoking her cob-pipe, Jeff came around the house with the rope on his arm.

"Sit down and rest a spell," insisted the old woman. "I get powerful lonesome day in and day out, with scarcely anybody to pass a word with."

"Where's Henry?" Jeff asked.

"Off on another spree," she answered, bitterly. "I tell you, Jeff, it's a hard thing for a mother to have to say about a son, but many and many's the time I've wished the Lord had a-taken him when he was a baby."

"Maybe he'll come all right yet, Aunt 'Liza," said Jeff.

"Not he. Not an honest day's work has he done since he left the army," she went on. "He was steady enough before the war, but camp life seemed to upset him like. He was just a boy, you see, and he fell in with a rough lot that started him to drinking and gambling. He's never been the same since. Pity the war took my poor Mac instead. *He* never would 'a' left his old mother to drudge and slave to keep soul and body together."

Jeff listened in amazement to this sudden burst of confidence. He had never heard her complain before, and scarcely knew how to answer her.

"Why, Aunt 'Liza, I never knew before that you had two sons!" he said.

"No, I suppose not," answered the old woman, sadly. "I suppose everybody's forgotten him but me. My Mac never had his dues. He never had justice done him. No, he never had justice done him." She kept repeating the words.

"He ought to have come home a captain, with a sword, for he was a brave boy, my Mac was. His picture is in the front room, if you've a mind to step in and look at it, and his cap and his canteen are hanging on the peg where he left them. Dear, dear! what a long time that's been!"

Jeff had all a boy's admiration for a hero. He took the faded cap reverently from its peg to examine the bullet-hole in the crown. He turned the battered canteen over and over, wishing he knew how it came by all its dents and bruises. The face that looked out from the old ambrotype with such steadfast eyes showed honesty in every line.

"Doesn't look much like old Henry," thought Jeff.

"Won't you tell me about him, Aunt 'Liza?" he asked, as he seated himself on the door-step again. "I always did love to hear about the war."

It was not often she had such an attentive listener. He questioned her eagerly, and she took a childish delight in recalling every detail connected with her "soldier-boy." It had been so many, many years since she had spoken of him to any one.

"Yes, he was wounded twice," she told him, "and lay for weeks in a hospital. Then he was six months in a Southern prison, and escaped and joined the army again. He had risked his own life, too, to save his colonel. Nobody had shown more courage and daring than he. Everybody told me that, but other men were promoted and sent home with titles. My boy came home to die, with only scars and a wasting fever."

Thrilled by her story, Jeff entered so fully into the spirit of the recital that he, too, forgot that McIntyre Barnes was only one among many thousands of heroes who were never raised above the rank of private. Mother-love transfigured simple patriotism into more than heroism.

As age came on she brooded over the thought more and more. Even the loss of one son and the neglect by the other did not cause her now such sorrow as that her country failed to recognize in her Mac the hero whom she all but worshipped.

Jeff found himself repeating the old woman's words as he went toward home late in the afternoon:

"No, Mac never had justice done him – he never had his dues."

Several days after that Jeff and Joe stopped at the house again to borrow a pail.

"We forgot to water the calves this morning," Jeff explained, "and they've had a pretty tough time hauling brush. They pull together splendidly now. We've been clearing out Mr. Spalding's orchard."

"Look around and help yourselves," Aunt 'Liza answered, briskly. "When once I get down on my knees to weed I'm too stiff to get up again in a hurry. You'll find how it is, maybe, when you get into your seventies."

"Have you heard the news?" asked Joe, as he held the pail for Daisy to drink.

"No. What, boys?"

"You know Decoration Day comes next week, and for once Stone Bluff is going to celebrate. A brass band is coming over from Riggsville, and they've sent to Indianapolis for some big speaker. There's going to be a procession, and a lot of girls will march around, all dressed in white, to decorate the graves."

Aunt 'Liza raised herself up painfully from the roll of carpet on which she had been kneeling. A bunch of weeds was still clasped in her stiff old fingers.

"Is it really so, Jeff?" she asked, tremulously, as he started to the well for another pail of water. "Are they going to do all that?"

"Yes, Aunt 'Liza."

"If I cut down all my roses, won't you boys take 'em out to the graveyard for me? I'm afraid nobody'll remember my poor Mac."

"Why, of course we will," they answered, heartily. "But why can't you go yourself, Aunt 'Liza? Everybody's going."

Aunt 'Liza pushed back the big sunbonnet, and looked wistfully across the meadows to a distant grove of cedar-trees that were outlined against the clear May sky.

"It's been six years since I was out there. I'm too old and stiff ever to walk that far again, but nobody knows how I long to go sometimes. I s'pose I must wait now until I'm carried there; but then it'll be too late to do anything for *him*."

Jeff looked at Joe, then at the hopeless expression of the wrinkled face.

"I'll tell you what we can do, Aunt 'Liza," he said, eagerly. "If you don't mind riding in such an outlandish rig, the cart is big enough to hold you comfortably, and we'll make the calves pull you out there. Will you go that way?"

Two tears that were rolling slowly down the furrows of her cheek dropped off suddenly as she laughed aloud.

"Why, bless your heart, sonny," she exclaimed, pleased as a child. "I'd ride behind a sheep to get there. What a fine picture we'll make, to be sure! They'll put us in a comic almanac."

Then she added, solemnly, "I'll thank you to my dying day, boys; and mark my words, the Lord will surely bless you for your kindness to a lonely old woman."

When they were out of sight of the house Joe lay down on the grass and rolled over and over in a fit of laughter.

"My eyes! what a figure we'll cut!" he gasped. "We'll have to go early, or we'll have a crowd at our heels."

"Don't you suppose," said Jeff, "that the grave will be in pretty bad shape, if she hasn't been out there for six years? If it is, she'll feel worse than if she had stayed at home."

"There's a lot of 'em all grown up with weeds and briars, with nothing but 'Unknown' marked on the headboards," answered Joe. "Let's get a cartload of sod, and fix them all up this afternoon."

A little while later the rickety gate of the neglected burying-ground opened to admit two boys shouldering spades and driving a team of calves.

"Get up, Bolivar!" called Jeff; "you're working for your country now."

That Decoration Day was a memorable one in Stone Bluff. The earliest sunshine that streaked the chimney-tops and gilded the broad Ohio, flowing past the little town, found Aunt 'Liza Barnes in her garden. She had stripped her bushes of early roses, and her borders of all their gay old-fashioned flowers, to twist into wreaths to carry with her.

When the morning train came puffing in from Indianapolis a large crowd had assembled at the station to catch a glimpse of Colonel Wake, the orator of the day. Jeff Whitman was there, painfully conscious of being dressed in his best, and of having a dreaded duty to perform.

He watched the colonel step into Judge Brown's carriage, and as it disappeared from view he walked slowly down the street in the direction it had gone.

All the morning Jeff hung around Judge Brown's house, trying to make up his mind to carry out his plan. At last he set his teeth together, and resolutely opened the gate. He felt ready to sink into the ground when the judge himself opened the door. Jeff's voice sounded far away and unnatural when he asked permission to speak to Colonel Wake.

In another moment the boy was in the dreaded presence, nervously fingering his hat, and trying to recall his carefully prepared speech. Then at sight of the colonel's smiling face his embarrassment vanished.

Before he realized it he had poured out the whole story of Aunt 'Liza's hero.

"We are going to take her out there this afternoon," he said, in conclusion. "She hasn't been for six years, and maybe she won't live to go another year. She says people always praise Captain Bowles, who's buried there, and Corporal Reed, and even the little drummer boy, but they never say anything about her Mac. And – and – well, I thought if you knew what a splendid soldier he was, and the brave things he did, maybe you'd just mention him, too. It would please the old lady so much."

The colonel promised, and gave Jeff a hearty handshake, saying he wanted to be introduced to Mrs. Barnes, and would depend on Jeff to point her out to him.

Nearly every one walked out to Cedar Ridge. The way was not long, and by-paths led through shady lanes, where blackberry vines and wild roses trailed over the fence-corners.

Colonel Wake and the judge drove in a carriage. The flower girls were drawn in a gaily decorated moving car, and carried flags and flowers. No one saw Aunt 'Liza in her strange conveyance, for she had gone long before the procession started.

"How nice and green it is," she said, fondly stroking the smooth sod. "I needn't have worried all this time, thinking it wasn't looked after. Somebody has been kind to my Mac. I was going to give every single one of these flowers to him, but now I want you boys to take some of them and put a wreath on every one of those six graves marked 'Unknown.'"

When the procession came up she was sitting on the same old folded quilt that had done duty in the cart as a seat. She leaned contentedly against the wooden headboard, marked simply, "McIntyre Barnes," with the number of his company and regiment. People looked at her in surprise, wondering how she came there.

The boys had hitched the calves out of sight, on the other side of the hill; for being boys, they could not bear to be laughed at.

Overhead the spicy cedar boughs waved softly in the May breeze. Below the bluff the waters of the Ohio sparkled in the sun. During all the ceremonies that preceded Colonel Wake's speech Aunt 'Liza sat with her dim eyes fixed on the Kentucky shore across the shining of the river.

While the band played and the choir sang she never turned her gaze from it. Then the clapping of hands that announced the speaker seemed to arouse her. She listened intently, expectantly.

Colonel Wake was a true orator. He swayed the listening crowd at his will, first to laughter and then to tears.

The boy's story that morning had greatly interested him. At the close, after referring tenderly to the unknown dead, and offering his passing tribute to the others, he told the story of McIntyre Barnes's heroic life.

He told it as only an old soldier and an eloquent speaker could tell it. The old woman, sitting on her folded quilt on her son's grave, threw off the black bonnet to catch every tone, every gesture, and smiled up into his face with proud, grateful eyes.

She felt like a queen coming into a long-deferred kingdom. That was her Mac he was talking about! This great soldier knew him and honoured him.

Somebody called for three cheers for McIntyre Barnes. As the lusty voices rang up through the cedar boughs and echoed across the water she bowed her head on the sod, and her happy tears fell

like rain. Perhaps it was the speech that moved them. Perhaps it was the sight of that wrinkled, tear-wet face; for when the flower girls finished strewing their garlands every grave had been decorated, but McIntyre Barnes's had received more than all. It was completely covered with fragrant bloom.

The people who stood near could not help smiling when the boys drove up with the little cart to which the frisky calves were hitched. But Aunt 'Liza was in such an uplifted frame of mind that she would not have noticed had they laughed aloud.

The colonel came and shook her hands, saying he was proud to know the mother of such a son. After that everybody else came crowding around to speak to her.

The band started back toward town, playing a lively quickstep, and the crowd soon dispersed. The boys did not talk much as they walked homeward in the sunset beside Bolivar and Daisy.

As for Aunt 'Liza, she sat smiling happily in the depths of the black sunbonnet, and saying over and over:

"My Mac has had his dues at last. It was a long time, but he's had justice done him at last!"

THE CAPTAIN'S CELEBRATION

"Is there anything I can do for you, captain?" Doctor Morris had made the rounds of the hospital and was standing beside the bed in a narrow little room at the end of the hall. He took the old man's feeble hand in one of his firm ones, and with the other gently stroked the white hair back from his wrinkled forehead. This seemed to smooth away some pain, too, for the faded blue eyes looked up at him with a grateful smile.

"Yes," he answered, "there is. I don't like to trouble you, doctor, but I do want a piece of an old broomstick, and if I could have it early in the morning, I'd be very much obliged to you, sir."

"A broomstick!" repeated the doctor, in amazement, wondering if the old man's mind was beginning to wander. "What under the sun could you do with it?"

A faint smile crossed the captain's face. Then a spell of coughing delayed the answer for a moment.

"I want to carve something," he panted, "and broom-handle wood is easy to cut. The nurse has been like an angel to me all these weeks that I have been in the hospital. Ever since they moved me into this room by myself, I've known that I haven't much longer to live, and I want to leave her something to show that I appreciate her kindness, and was grateful for it."

The doctor pressed the old man's hand as he went on: "I've been thinking I would like to make her a little chain. My grandfather taught me to carve such things when I was a lad. He was a Swiss, you know, and followed my mother over to this country soon after I was born. He was so old that all he could do was just to sit under the trees and carve little toys to amuse the children. I have his pocket-knife yet," he added, with a smile of childish satisfaction that made the old face pathetic.

He looked down at his right hand, so twisted out of shape that it was nearly useless. "I can't do as good work as I used to do thirty years ago, before that Minie ball crippled me," he said. "But Miss Mary will make allowances; she will know that I remembered and was grateful, don't you think?" he asked, anxiously.

"Most certainly," answered the doctor, stooping to arrange the patient's pillows more comfortably about him. "But, captain, I am afraid that I can't allow you to undertake anything that will be a tax on your strength. You haven't any to spare."

So deep a shade of disappointment crept into the old man's wistful eyes that the doctor felt an ache in his throat, and drove it away with a little laugh. "Pshaw!" he said, hastily. "You shall have a mile of broomsticks if you want them. I'll send my son Max up with one inside the next hour."

The gong had just struck the signal for dismissal in the third-ward school building, when the busy physician drove up to the curbstone in his sleigh to get his boy. "Max will be down in a minute, Doctor Morris!" called a boy, as he ran past the sleigh with his skates slung over his shoulder. "Miss Clay kept some of 'em to see about celebrating Washington's Birthday."

"Thank you, Ned," answered the doctor. He drew the robes closer about him as he walked the horse up and down, for there was a keen wind blowing this cold February afternoon. Presently a group of boys loitered by and stood on the corner, waiting for the rest of Miss Clay's pupils to join them.

"I'm glad Miss Clay isn't my teacher!" one of them exclaimed, in a loud voice. "Skating's too good now to waste time learning to spout pieces."

"Well, I think it's about time to give George Washington a rest," said the largest boy in the group. "He's a back number, and I'll tell her so, too, if she asks me to say any of her old pieces."

"That's a pretty way to talk about the Father of your Country!" piped up a little fellow in spectacles, who was sliding on the ice in the gutter. "Back number! I just dare you to say that to Miss Clay!"

The doctor overheard this, but he did not hear the quarrel that followed, for Max came running down just then, and climbed into the sleigh.

"You're late to-day, my boy. What's the trouble?"

"Oh, Miss Clay kept us to arrange a programme for Washington's Birthday, and nobody wanted to take part. We're all tired of the same old thing year after year – just songs and recitations and dialogues about the same old fellow!"

"A fine lot of patriots this next generation is going to turn out!" said the doctor, so sternly that Max gave him a quick glance of surprise, and then flushed at his evident disapproval. The grim look crept into the man's eyes that was always there when he was absorbed in a critical case.

"O papa, are we going home?" cried Max, in a disappointed tone, as the horse turned in that direction.

"For a few minutes," answered Doctor Morris. "I want you to take something to one of my patients at the hospital. I'll leave you with him while I go on to the Berridge place."

Max, who had expected a long sleigh-ride, forgot his disappointment when he found that Captain Wilshire was an old soldier, who bore the scars of more than one battle. An internal wound, received at Shiloh, still troubled him at times, and exposure during the last year of the war had brought on the consumption that was now slowly taking his life away.

"He is one of the truest patriots it has ever been my honour to meet," said the doctor. "I have known many statesmen in my time, several generals and two Presidents. Any one of them might well be proud to take off his hat to Joe Wilshire. When you see the old hero lying alone, Max, in that cheerless little room in the hospital, I want you to think of the reason why I so greatly respect him. It is not simply because he was brave in battle, or because his heroic cheerfulness kept him alive through half a year in Libby Prison, or because he came home with the seeds of disease planted in his system and his good right hand crippled and useless. Many a man has encountered these tests, and yet has lost his zeal for his country as soon as the cannon smoke cleared away and the martial music was done."

"Then why is it, papa?" asked Max, for they had reached the house, and the doctor was looking in the bottom of the sleigh for the hitching-strap.

"Well, when he came home, he was of course poor. He made a meagre living for his wife and baby with only a few acres of land and of fruit-trees with which to do it. Several times his old comrades suggested to him that he ought to apply for some fat government office, but he always said, 'Boys, I know that you mean well, and that you and my friends could probably get me in on the score of my being a disabled soldier; but I know and you know that I am not competent to fill such an office. If I could fill an office, and at the same time serve my country by doing so, I'd unhesitatingly take one. But I'd only be serving myself by filling my pockets at the government's expense. No, I'm obliged to you, boys, but I can't feel that it would be exactly honourable.'

"Now that's patriotism, Max, of the highest type, showing unselfish loyalty and love of country!" exclaimed the doctor, as he sprang out of the sleigh. "I was disturbed and hurt just now, when I heard the boys talking about Washington being a 'back number.' It hurt because there is some truth in it. Wars call out such generals, but there are too few men in these times of peace who step into office with Washington's high, unselfish motives. And I fear the number is few of men who will deliberately give up the honour and emolument of office because they believe some one else can render better service, or because principle pulls harder than public purse-strings. Yes, such patriotism is getting to be a 'back number' – so far back that it has grown burdensome for some people to honour it, even once a year."

Max had seldom heard his father speak so indignantly before, and looked at him in surprise as he gave a final fierce tug at the knot he had tied in the halter.

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