

John's Boy
by Allie Woodruff

“Say! Mister, can you give me a job?”

John Preston turned sharply around to see who had addressed him, and saw a thin, hungry faced boy, not more than twelve years old, his clothes threadbare, and his shoes the worse for wear.

At this moment Mr. Preston was trying to solve the difficult problem of how his heavy laden apple orchard was to be cleared, and the fruit safely stored before frost. He did not understand the question, but he instinctively put his hand in his pocket and brought out a handful of pennies and dimes.

The boy blushed as he moved his feet uneasily as if to hide the hole in his shoes, as he said:

“No, sir, please don't; I only asked you for a job; I don't want money until I have earned it.”

“A job! Well, what can a man of your size do?” asked Mr. Preston, laughing, as he put the coins back in his pocket.

“I can do what I'm told, or at least I'll try.”

“Well, if you can and will do that, you will do better than the average. If we can agree on terms, you are just the man for me,” said Mr. Preston.

Just then came the call to supper, and the man led the way to the house, followed by the boy. As they came to the door the boy stopped, and said:

“I guess I won't go in; I'll wait here until you come out.”

“Nonsense, boy, come along.”

They entered the large pleasant room where they found the rest of the family waiting for them.

Father Preston was an invalid, being crippled by rheumatism so that he could not walk without the help a crutch. Mother Preston was a quiet, motherly little woman, who was always ready to do a kind deed, or to help one who was in trouble.

Hannah the “help,” was a perfect housekeeper, but her best friends had to own that she had “nerves.”

Father Preston was already seated at the table when they entered, and looked up in surprise as John came in with his strange companion.

“Father, I have just hired a new man.”

“Man! what can he do?”

“Do as I tell him.”

“Humph!”

He was a man of few words, but he contrived to make that “Humph” very expressive to the boy who stood there, feeling very uncomfortable under the old man’s keen eyes, which seemed to be reading his very thoughts.

Mother Preston said nothing, but moved her plate a little to make room for another and called Hannah to bring a chair for the boy.

Hannah did as she was told, but could not refrain from giving some sharp looks in the direction of the new comer. Soon they were all seated at the table, and the boy had such a supper as they seldom enjoyed at home. Biscuit and butter, baked potatoes with cream on them, a slice of nice cake, and a goblet full of milk all for himself.

He thought of little Katie at home, and of how only that morning she had been so pleased with a little cup of milk that a neighbor had given, how she had shared it with Teddy—each “tasting” of it in turn until it was all gone—“if she only had this!”

A queer feeling came over the boy as he thought of home, and for a moment he forgot that he was among strangers, even forgot the keen old eyes opposite that were watching him so closely.

After supper John took the boy out with him to attend to the usual evening work. After all was done for the night, John by a few kindly questions soon learned all about his past life.

His name was Lewis Stone, and his father had been a carpenter, but had been killed by the falling of a scaffolding about two years before. A small sum of money which was saved for a “rainy day” and the house and little garden where they lived was all that was left.

With Lewis’ care the garden supplied them with vegetables, and his mother did plain sewing. But work was not plenty, and Amy, the oldest of the family, left the high school, where she was in her last year and standing high in her class, and took the position of primary teacher in the little town of Elm Crossing, five miles from home.

Little Ted, the cripple, and three-year old Katie comprised the family.

This was the first time that Lewis had left home, and it was not strange that he was just a little bit homesick as he found himself alone in his little room under the Preston roof that night.

“The idea of John’s hiring that boy!” said father.

“Whoever he is we will try and make him happy while he stays here,” said the kind little woman.

Out on the back porch Hannah was telling her much esteemed self—“what did Mr. John bring that boy here for. He’ll stone the cat, tease Major, and then the pears and grapes—ough. Boys are no good anyhow.”

Brave John Preston! He had given up his college course a year before, and came home to care for his father in illness, and when it was decided that he would always be lame he had taken the whole care of the farm and proved that a good education did not spoil a farmer.

Lewis soon learned to like living on a farm, and if he was somewhat awkward at first he soon grew accustomed to his duties.

Major, the watchdog, was his devoted follower, and the horses soon learned to know him. They were his special friends and when “Mr. John” gave him the entire care of them he thought himself “almost a man.”

Every Saturday night John drove into town, and Lewis had the pleasure of a ride home behind the pretty horses, almost as grand as if he had owned them himself.

Sometimes they would go on Friday afternoon and drive around by the way of Elm Crossing, and take Amy home from school; then Lewis had Saturday at home.

Weeks passed, and the orchard and garden were cleared, and the fruit safely stored. The pears and grapes were neatly picked and carried in; even Hannah had to own that they could not well do without “John’s boy,” and Lewis was content and happy and thought his kind employer “a prince.”

What his sister Amy thought she did not say.

Late in the fall Lewis was taking in the last of the garden vegetables when a boy from town stopped on his way home from Brach woods.

“Say, Lew, you must be a green one to stay out here on this poky old farm, when we are having such lots of fun in town.”

"'Poky old farm' why this is real nice, and Mr. John is just splendid, and his mother! just look at my mittens—she knit them, and now she is knitting some nice red stockings for me to carry home for Katie at Christmas."

"Oh! you're a soft one—say; did you know that Billy Coates' horse was stolen last night?"

"No! you don't mean it."

"Well it was all the same, and there's two special police officers down at Cragg's now."

"Can't they catch the thieves?"

"They can tell a better story after they try. A small chap came on here about a week ago and put up at Tyler's, said that he was a detective; he ain't pulling on the same team with them other fellers, and it's my opinion that he thinks more of having a good time than of catching rogues."

"How did he know a week ago about horse thieves when Coates' horse was stolen only last night?"

"Well, you see there have been other breaks; they broke into a store over in Cornwall last week, and a few nights ago money was lost from Stewart's safe, and Tyler says some other things are missing too; he's clerk there, you know."

"It does seem as though they might catch them if they tried."

"Suppose you try if you think it is so easy; there's \$500 reward, more money than you can earn digging turnips."

After the boy had gone Lewis returned to his work, but his mind was full of what he had just heard; John was away to attend a county convention, and would not be home until the night. And in spite of his determined bravery a queer feeling would come over him as he thought of the coming night.

"Oh, nonsense, I'm no coward, but I will hurry through this and get everything done before dark." Finally all was done and he was in the stable pulling down the hay in Dick's manger when he heard someone call: "Lewis, where are you?"

"Here! Why, Wade Tyler! what are you out here for?"

"Come out to see the Boss, go in the house, and send him out, will you?"

"He isn't there, he's gone over to Woolsey, and won't be home till tomorrow night."

“Is that so! here is a man that wants to buy a span of horses, and I told him that Preston’s bays were the finest in the country; so we’re driven over to see them.”

“Oh sir? he wouldn’t sell Dick and Jerry. Oh, I couldn’t have them go.”

Tyler laughed scornfully as he turned to the man who had come with him, and said: “We will have a look at them anyhow.”

So saying they went into the barn, and examined the horses closely—praising Lewis for the good care he had given them. They also spoke of the nice convenient barn, asked to see the harness room and spent some time, looking around. As they were leaving Tyler said:

“Do you always lock your barn? There are horse thieves around.”

“Oh, yes, there is a spring lock on the stable door, and we fasten it every night.”

“That’s right, boy, keep things snug, and tell Mr. Preston that we will be over again Saturday.” “Here’s a quarter for you, my boy; we’ll see you later.”

With a laugh at their own wit they drove off, and Lewis fastened the stable door and went into the house, thinking to himself “now that quarter will buy Kate a doll, and Amy will dress it all ready for Christmas.”

“Have you fastened everything securely? It’s going to be a rough night, it’s my opinion, it’ll storm before morning.”

“Everything is done just as John told me, sir.”

“Wood and water brought in?”

“Yea, sir.”

“Well, you do very well for a boy. When John comes home you shall have a treat. Is your sister at home?”

“Yes, sir, school’s out last week.”

“If it is a good day, tomorrow you may drive over to town soon after dinner, and give her a ride after the bays; you might as well take the double wagon, and then they all can go, if they wish.”

Could he believe his ears! Did father Preston trust him like that?

“You can be at the depot in time for the 6:30 train, to meet John.”

It was a very happy boy that went up to his room that night, and his dreams were full of the ride that was to be.

Outside the wind roared loudly, and a few dashes of rain on his window awakened him.

Oh! what if it should rain tomorrow? Well, they won't be disappointed, for they don't know about it. Won't the fellows stare to see me drive so? I'll drive round by Stewart's store, and let Tyler have a look at the team, but he won't get them, not in a hundred years. I'm so glad that John is coming home tomorrow.

"What was that?" a short, sharp, bark from Major, as though he had been hurt.

In less than a minute he was creeping down the stairs, carefully so as not to awaken any one, out to the shed to a large box in one corner, where Major usually slept; the straw was still warm, but the wind was too loud.

Perhaps he was down to the barn. It was very dark, but Lewis knew every inch of the way, down through the gate, and into the wagon shed; no dog there. Out to front of the barn he went bang against something; it was the double buggy; what was it there for? Surely the wind couldn't do that; a terrible fear sent him quickly across the barn, the door was open, and at once he caught the faint gleam of the light. Almost at the same instant a man came to the door leading Dick already harnessed, another man followed with Jerry, and, with the aid of a few curses at their own blunders in the dark, they soon had them harnessed to the buggy. Instead of driving off at once, as Lewis expected, they tied them to a post, and came back to the door, so near that the boy standing shivering behind it could hear every word distinctly.

"You say the old man has lots of cash. Where does he keep it?"

"That's for us to find out."

"No one is to be seriously hurt, mind you."

"Oh, Wade, you're too fresh, we've got the team, and we will get the money and dig out."

"What if they get wind of this, and follow us?"

"We'll leave the wagon, and mount the horses and ride. No horses in town could catch us."

"I must have a saddle then, or I'd break my neck in the dark."

"There's two saddles hanging in the harness room; we'll take them. Stow away those things and make room."

Rolling the lantern in one of his coats, it was soon packed snugly under the seat. The other coat followed, and they turned to go into the barn again.

“Say now, no fooling, swear that you won’t harm the old folks or that boy.”

“I swear I will harm the first one who opposes me; the money I will have; now lead the way to the harness-room. It’s confounded dark in here.”

For a moment Lewis stood as one petrified; then with all his might he slammed the heavy door together, and the spring lock caught it just as a heavy body banged against it from the inside. No danger of its giving way, and there was no other opening outside.

Quickly undoing the horses, he headed them towards the town. A few sharp words, and they were flying over the ground at a speed that would have astonished their owner if he could have seen them.

The two miles into town seemed a terrible distance to the boy as he went tearing through the darkness; the rain beat on his bare head, and chilled his half dressed body, but he did not know it.

Could he save them? The poor, helpless old man at home, and the dear little woman who had been as kind as a mother to him?

Cragg’s at last, and as he drew his panting horses up before the Hotel the door opened and several men rushed out. They were on the watch that night, and hearing such fast driving across the bridge they were out to learn the cause.

“Come quick. Oh do! they will kill him sure.”

“Why, it’s Preston’s boy,” said Cragg, “some trouble there, I’m afraid.”

Not stopping for questions, they sprang into the wagon, and the bays went homeward as fast as they had come.

Once there they found the thieves securely caged, their lanterns and coats, with their revolvers in the pocket, were in the wagon, and in the darkness they had been unable to get out. They were easily secured, and proved to be Wade Tyler and the bogus detective. In Wade’s pocket they found the roll of bills entire which he had taken from Stewart’s safe, and in the “detective’s” coat was a letter from one of the gang which told the whereabouts of Billy Coates’ horse, in fact, it gave the whole scheme away.

When John came home the next day and heard the whole story he could hardly find words to thank him, he gave Lewis the promise of a thorough business education, then a college course, if he wished.

A few days after this, one of the same officers who had made the arrest drove up

to the farm—

“Here boy, I have a warrant for you; they want you over to town.”

“Sir?” said Lewis, as with a scared white face he turned to John, who stood there.

“Jump into the carriage there, and I’ll go too and take care of you.”

Over at the hotel they found quite a number of grave looking men waiting for them

The policeman marched Lewis in—

“Here’s your man.”

After a few questions, the chief handed him a roll of bills, saying, "There was a reward of \$500 offered for the horse thieves; and you caught them: there were other robberies brought to light through your brave action that night, and we have thought it only just to double the amount; make good use of it, my boy."

Sister Amy finished her course in the high school, and then went as mistress of Preston farm. Lewis was faithful in his studies, as he was in everything else, and even father Preston said that he was proud of John’s boy.

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