

The Free Press Short Story

THE PERTNESS OF JOHNNY

DELLA DIMMITT

I WAS sitting on Aunt Susan Wetherby's cool back porch thinking guiltily of the stack of examination papers upstairs in my room and wishing every day were Saturday when one of Aunt Susan's neighbors came round the corner of the house.

"Good morning, Harriet," was Aunt Susan's cheerful greeting. "You know the school-teacher, don't you?"

The amenities being observed, the visitor sat down in a worn spilt-bottomed chair and removed her sunbonnet. She was a thin woman with a trailing sweetness of voice and an air of habitual leaning on some one for support, and it was not long before she made her errand known.

"Aunt Susan," she said, hesitatingly, "with a glance in my direction that indicated a faint desire on her part for my withdrawal, 'I'm thinking of papering my front room.'"

"Well, I don't know as I would, Harriet," said Aunt Susan, mildly. "If I remember rightly, you had that room papered the spring before Amos was taken away; it ain't a mite soiled, and it's a good color, not too gay nor too sober, which to my mind is the chief thing to consider in selectin' a wall paper; and I recollect your tellin' me every day that paper was hung that you liked it better than any other design you'd ever seen."

"So I did. When I first saw it in Jonas Pratt's store, it just filled my eye. It was all in such pretty shades of drab with little blue dabs here and there that made me think of a rainy day when the sun keeps tryin' to break through the clouds. You know yourself how that is, Aunt Susan. I don't know as I can make it plain the way I've felt about that wall paper; it's like the parable of a sower went forth to sow! Now, the thing that you set your mind on afit a man with a big sack of grain on his back, but it's the scatterin' wide to the winds of kind words and good deeds. And so when I look at that wall paper it ain't them mingly shades of drab, but it's other things I see—it's when Amos first brought me there to his father's house, it's the days of hard work, the days of sunshine, and the days of sorrow; it's the children taken away; it's Amos dead, and back of it all the everlasting blue of God's love. That's what that wall paper is to me."

I winked tears out of my eyes and Aunt Susan openly wiped hers. To her there was nothing incongruous in a wall paper typifying religion and life and poetry.

"I know, Harriet," she said, and the tenderness lay deep in her voice, "I know. Then, why are you going to paper?"

Recalled from her dream, Mrs. Alkire sighed with her sunbonnet strings before the truth came out.

"Johnny says it's too old-fashioned and sober. He says he don't life to set there."

"Then let Johnny do his settin' somewhere else," and it seemed to me that I detected a suspicion of tartness in Aunt Susan's full, round, pleasant tones.

"I want that Johnny should be pleased," said Mrs. Alkire, "I want that he should, especially since he's like to change his way of livin'."

"Why, Harriet," and Aunt Susan dropped the knife with which she had been industriously paring apples for a pie, sitting bolt upright in her astonishment, "why, Harriet, you don't mean to tell me Johnny is goin' to get married?"

"He's thinkin' about it some," and Mrs. Alkire, in a pleasant glow now that the great news had been imparted, went on as if quite oblivious of an alien presence. "I asked if I should tell you, and he said, 'Certainly, mother, I've no doubt to be ashamed of it.' Johnny is that old-fashioned, you know, talks about it as sensible."

"Who is the girl?" demanded Aunt Susan, not yet recovered from her astonishment.

"Why, it's Squire Forbes' Annie."

"Little Annie Forbes?" exclaimed Aunt Susan. "I ain't seen the child this long while, not since Abner and me used to 'tend Quarterly meetin' in the Pigeon neighborhood and put at Squires Forbes'! But I'll tell you, Harriet, if little Annie has made up as nice a woman as the older girls made, you have cause to fall on your knees and give thanks. Is it all settled between her and Johnny?"

"It's as good as settled," said Johnny's mother, speaking with conviction. "Johnny's mind is made up."

"And how about Annie's mind?" quickly and searchingly questioned Aunt Susan.

"Well, I don't know as Annie's give Johnny his answer, yet."

"Then, Harriet," gently advised Aunt Susan, "I don't know as I'd speak of it abroad before she does."

"No," said Mrs. Alkire, rising to go. "I won't. It ought to be give over by Annie's people, anyhow; but ever since I've been in the neighborhood, Aunt Susan, you've been with me in all the joys and sorrows of my life and I just couldn't bear not to talk it over with you. As I said to Johnny, even if something should happen to prevent you and Annie marryin', Aunt Susan Wetherby is as deep as a well."

After the click of the picket gate had announced the safe distance of Mrs. Alkire, I turned to Aunt Susan. She had been fittingly characterized "a well."

Ever since I had been admitted as a boarder into that immaculate spare room with its optimistic hit-and-miss rag carpet, its enormous valance-hung bed and cavernous chest of drawers—that engulfed the sum total of my possessions in so simple a way that it made me positively ashamed of their shrunken meagreness, I had felt the abundance of a nature that was indeed a well, never falling in its fresh outpouring nor yet ever yielding up to exhaustion the supply that came from its hidden springs.

"Aunt Susan," I said, reaching after a spray of the honeysuckle that bent invitingly above my head, "what is the matter with Johnny Alkire?"

"Why, honey," replied Aunt Susan with a laugh that bespoke a cheerful amity toward the whole world of mankind, "I don't know as there's anything the matter with him."

"I am sure there is," I persisted between whiffs of the creamy blooms that festooned the porch; "you never speak out hearty in praise of him, and you don't have that pucker at the corners of your mouth unless you have seen a fly in the ointment, somewhere."

"Johnny is a good boy," was the judgment rendered with what to my mind seemed an effort at judicial fairness. "He's always been that, and I don't know as the rest of us who have more fallin' and bigger ones have any call to speak ill of him. But it was this way with Harriet; he was the only one left to Harriet and Amos out of the five children born to them. They was all such delicate, spindlin' babies and none of them before him lived to be but into short clothes; so when Johnny, the very last of the lot, showed a disposition right from the very first to thrive and grow up, why it seemed little short of a miracle to his pa and ma."

"I think they was the proudest parents I ever saw," when they presented the little fellow for baptism, and he certainly did behave in a way that reflected credit on himself and them too. He never hollered, never whimpered, just looked up at the preacher as if he understood it all and was enjoyin' the stir he was creatin'. And he was that way about everything. He did things better than other babies; he learned to walk earlier, and he could talk plainer, and by the time he got big enough to go to school he'd finished the primer and was halfway through his first reader."

"Amos used to say he was the pertest little chap in the whole county, and I reckon he was about right," for he certainly did take the shine off all them that was raised around here, and last of the store that Amos did set by that child. If ever you got within earshot of Amos it was, "Say, let me tell you what that boy of mine has sort of up to." Now you know, honey, that sort of a feelin' on the part of a parent, ain't a-goin' fur toward lessenin' the esteem a boy like Johnny just naturally feels for himself, and so it wasn't surprisin' when Johnny was sent off to college that he came back in less than two weeks.

"He gave out that they couldn't teach him anythin' at college that he didn't know already, and Amos, instead of chastizin' and scoldin' him back, was that pleased he took him into partnership the very next spring."

"And so it went on, Johnny a-growin' into the belief that he was as wise as Solomon, a-dispensin' of his judgments and a-correctin' of the false notions of his neighbors right and left as if he had the government of the whole moral universe on his shoulders."

"Now, mind, I ain't sayin' that Johnny ain't made a fine man, for he has. He's as straight as a string in all his business transactions, and his words is as good as his bond; he never overreaches, and he's always ready and willin' to help a neighbor out of a pinch. And more than all that, he's religious. You know yourself, honey, when he passes the communion he looks like he'd been born to do it; and as for the Christian virtues, he possesses all the apostle's saw fit to name but just bare one, and that's meekness. It's such a little one, and it's named along at the last like as if it was so insignificant it almost escaped Paul's notice, and it is insignificant—when it's there to be looked at. But when it's lackin', honey, it somehow makes you feel like you'd rather see just that one grace a-thrown' out a little shoot than to behold all the rest a-flourishin' and readin' out good and strong, like they meant to cover the whole earth."

When this point in Aunt Susan's discourse was reached, she had finished paring her apples. As she rose to go out into the pantry to make her pie, she paused just long enough to make this further and seemingly irrelevant remark, "I don't think Harriet will paper—I don't think she will need to."

It was late the next autumn, after my summer vacation was over and I was back in school again, that I bethought me to ask if the papering had been done.

"No, honey," replied Aunt Susan, "it hain't been done yet, and it's my opinion that it will be quite a spell before Johnny will suggest makin' any change in wall paper."

"I suppose his sweetheart liked the old pattern," I threw out, by way of suggestion.

I was so afraid that I was going to miss the story.

"I don't know as it's right in me to

talk of it, but, bein' as you heard Harriet fall me what she did, you may as well know the rest, if you're sure it will go no further." Here she looked a large interrogation point.

I affirmed with haste and she proceeded. "Now, it was this way with Johnny, honey. You see, he'd never paid any attention to the girls. Mebbe he thought none of them was good enough for him, and mebbe he didn't think that way at all; but he got the name fur feelin' so, anyway, and it's mighty hard to shake a bell when once it's grounded into folks. So when Johnny did get out, there was the biggest flutter you can imagine, and he'd certainly showed the same sense in selectin' a girl that he exercised in his everyday business. I guess, honey, that was the real cause of the job he finally got—he just made it seem a little too much like business."

"Now, I don't say that Johnny had ever calculated, I don't say that he ever once thought of Squire Forbes bein' the largest landowner in the county, or his makin' the biggest house and the most influence; but, still, it would have been as unlike as possible for Johnny to have taken a notion to Lucy Graven that helps in his mother's kitchen, though Duoy's as handsome and good a girl as ever lived. Human nature is just that contrary, honey, that Johnny would have gone up a hundred per cent. in everybody's estimation if he had have chosen Lucy, fur she'd been faithfuller than most daughters 'to Harriet."

Course Annie was a suitable match from a worldly point of view, and whether or not he had an eye to that, he made his intentions known right from the start.

"Some say he'd already spoke to the Squire before he'd ever been to see Annie. That's honorable, of course, but it ain't the way a girl likes it done best. They're just like that little bay mare Abner drives to his runabout. She's the gentlest creature to handle, but every single time he tries to catch her she backs off and makes him chase all over the lot until he's clean wore out before she'll submit to havin' the bits put into her mouth."

Johnny didn't propose to get winded by any such fool nonsense as that, so he got the Squire's consent, and then he went after Annie, holdin' his bride right in plain sight, movin' as calm and deliberate as if he knowed of no reason on earth why he should be in a hurry and showin' no concern whatever when Annie kept puttin' him off and puttin' him off.

"The Squire was mightily pleased, there was no mistake about that; and oftentimes the Squire would go into the parlor or Johnny would come out, and the settin' and the two of them would spend a whole evenin' discussin' better ways of farmin'. And Johnny, he was right up; he takes all the scientific journals, and he sends abroad fur his seeds, and then he tests them, and he is onto all the latest wrinkles in fertilizin' and the like, and it's a fact he does raise more to the acre than any farmer in the community; and as fur stock raisin', his Shortorns and his Yorkshires have carried off blue ribbons enough, I guess, to belt his whole farm. Of course that would have been a highly acceptable way of courtin' if it had been the Squire Johnny was after marryin'; but it didn't help him with Annie. She was all fur fine needlework and paintin'; and, honey, I wish you could see the work she does. Her drawn work is as fine as cobweb, and as fur paintin', why, their walls is covered with pictures. It does seem like any man with a grain of sense would just naturally know a girl would take pride in executin' all that, but Johnny was so concerned fur fear that the very apple of Annie's eye—it is truin' on the eyesight, you know that, honey—that he tried his level best to make her promise never to do another stitch, and she right in the midst of a table cloth with an openwork border a foot deep!

"Now, that was bad enough, to show no appreciation of Annie's talents, but she might have overlooked that if he hadn't undertook Annie's instruction, likewise. She's got a place framed and hung up over the parlor mantelboard—that's the very apple of Annie's eye. It's a meadow scene, with a couple of cows a-drinkin' out of a still pool, and them that judges say it's worth a hundred dollars—if it's worth one—without any frame on it at all. Well, after Johnny had studied it a bit he told Annie the forelegs of her cows wasn't accordin' to nature, and Annie, instead of bein' pleased to be set right, as he thought she would be, got mad and told Johnny on the spot that when he could paint a better cow than she could, he could have her and not until then."

"I don't know which one of them told the Squire, but he laughed and chuckled like it was a mighty good joke, but all the same he talked to Annie, who didn't seem to see it that way. The Squire had no mind of lettin' Johnny's six hundred acres slip away from his family on any such whim as that, and I don't know but what Annie would have been forced to give in if it hadn't been election year."

"Now, Johnny is a Republican and the Squire is a Democrat, and, though there's no reason on earth, so fur as I can see, why men folks should lock horns over politics these days, it seems the Squire and Johnny got into a discussion and Johnny found the Squire was so far off the track that he saw it to be his plain duty to set him right."

"Now, most folks would have hesitated about openin' the subject with a man that had named his first boy Andrew Jackson and who'd been votin' steady and I expect prayin' some that-a-way, too, for forty odd years; but when Johnny's got a bigger day's work than common on hand he just gets up a little earlier in the mornin', that's all. There ain't a bit of a shirk about Johnny."

"And so he just went right after the Squire, explainin' to him that his post-

# Did You Ever Stop To Think?

By EDSON R. WAITE, SHAWNEE, OKLAHOMA

Gault MacGowan, Editor of the Trinidad Guardian, Port-of-Spain (B. W. I), says:

"The more I see of advertising, the more I am convinced that we know nothing about it."

"We built up a world boom by advertising luxuries we could do without; then when the luxuries were doing all the business there was a slump in primary commodities. Naturally and logically everyone was buying luxuries and was learning to do without primary products. The girls smoked cigarettes instead of eating sugar candy and chocolate; they gave up bread for rusks; they began to use artificial silk instead of wool and cotton and flannel; we use electricity instead of coal; we learned to eat canned goods instead of village product. Thousands of people acquired a taste for canned milk instead of fresh."

"What did primary products do? Instead of advertising their way to success too, they cried overproduction. Overproduction is only a child's way of saying 'no buyers.'"

"Look around and see who advertises least. It is the producer of primary products every time. They got the idea that they were indispensable and when they found they were not, they sat down and wept instead of taking a course in salesmanship."

"Fortunes used to be made out of land and farming. The farmer as the one-man shop in the one-horse town. Everybody had to go to him or starve. Nowadays instead of going to the farmer it is easier to buy canned food; luxuries advertised by middlemen or importers. The farmer sits around and wonders where his customers have gone."

"We can do without bread, cocoa, sugar, potatoes and practically all the fresh produce there is. But the producers 'kid' themselves that we can't. They blame economics and overproduction for lack of sales. If they advertised and packed and marketed like everybody else, they would not get left in the rush."

"When the primary producers learn to keep pace in their advertising with the producers of luxury goods, the world will get balanced again. So long as the primary producers don't get together and advertise so long will they tell a hard luck tale. And so long will the world slump, because, though we all like luxuries, we can only buy them so long as enough of us earn the right to do it by selling the fruits of the sweat of our brow."

## "And Those Who Sweat Must Learn to Sell"

Pathetically yours,  
DOUGLAS S. ROBERTSON,  
Trustee.

### Hospital for Sick Children

67 COLLEGE ST., TORONTO 2  
(Country Branch, Thistletown)

December, 1932.

Dear Mr. Editor:

The prolonged period of hard times has created a most difficult problem for Ontario's most famous Hospital for Sick Children, which only the benevolent public can solve. Here it is, in nutshell:

The Hospital has nursed in its cots this year 7,694 small sufferers, an increase of 237 over the total of the previous year. In addition, 64,202 treatments were given in the great Out-Patient Department, an increase of 16,092. On the 22nd of December were recorded in the previous year there was a similar growth in the demand for the merciful ministrations of the Hospital. While all this has been going on the amount of the donations from the kind-hearted have decreased by many thousands of dollars, creating the situation of far more to be done and far less to do it with.

The statutory grants obtained by the Hospital fall much short of being sufficient to pay for the actual cost of maintenance of the little patients and each additional patient means an added deficit. The task of bridging the gap between the cost of operation and the very meagre amount usually been accomplished by contributions from the benevolent. While the Hospital has received the generosity of its friends who kindly donate to its work yearly, and is continually adding new ones, the amount has been a somewhat alarming extent in the response to last year's appeal for funds and there has been little improvement in that respect throughout the year. It is unthinkable that any child needing the humane service provided by the Hospital should be refused. The Trustees are anxious and can only hope that the kind-hearted people of the province will see them through the difficulty by a most generous response to the present appeal.

Public benevolence has built the Hospital for Sick Children to the proud eminence of being the great institution of its kind in the world. Its country branch at Thistletown is recognized model and persons interested in child welfare are invited to all parts of the globe to inspect it. Any child in the Province of Ontario, deformed or diseased, is eligible for admittance to this wonderful institution, the financial resources, but when the very best that any Hospital can give is placed within easy reach of the poorest child.

Now, more urgently than ever before, is the Hospital in need of contributions and the amount would be considered too small. Please ask the benevolent in your community to help. Tell them that the Hospital, covering 57 years, is not that of merely adding cot to cot and ward to ward. It is the story of a battle constantly waged against disease and deformity, with all the advancing resources of the medical and surgical sciences. It is a story of demands which have ever exceeded the resources, but which have always been met by generous response to appeals for aid. But for the generosity the Hospital would many times have been bankrupt. Ask your readers, please, to prevent it from becoming new.