



10. When Jehosophat Forgot His Piece

There was much excitement in the Red Schoolhouse. Examinations were over; books laid aside. And the walls re-echoed to thrilling sounds,—to happy voices and shuffling feet, to poetry, marches, and songs. They were practising for Commencement, for Closing Day. And at home the parents were busy, too, making white dresses and sashes for the girls, buying new suits for the boys in town, or making some over from father's old trousers.

Marmaduke was to take part in the marches and songs, but Jehosophat had to speak a whole piece, all alone too. It was a great honor, no doubt about that, which Jehosophat didn't appreciate. He thought it a bother.

Now their teacher was a patriot and fond of History. All through the term she had told them tales of brave lads who were good and great. Probably she wanted them to become good and great, too, and of course it was the thing to be. That Jehosophat knew, but it was pretty hard when one kept forgetting.

So he wasn't at all sure of himself, but of one thing he was sure,—the stories were lost on Fatty. Try as he would he never could think of him as being "good and great," or exactly "a hero."

But that was the least of Jehosophat's worries. He had been given a piece to learn—to recite before a big crowd!

It was poetry—all about a boy who had stuck by his ship and gone down with it, too. The piece was called by the boy's name—a queer sort of word—Casabianca. If the piece was as hard as its name, Jehosophat thought he never would learn it.

"Well, Jehosophat," said his father that night, "how's the orator?"

But Mother said,—

"Don't tease him, Will, I'm sure he'll do us proud."

Jhosophat squirmed in his seat. He didn't want to "do anyone proud." That was not his ambition. And he squirmed still more when she asked him,—

"Have you learned it all, Jehosophat?"

He mumbled something that sounded like,—

"Donev'nknownameyet."

So next day when he came back from school he had to stay in the parlour to study it.

After a while—not so long a while, either—he called to Mother,—

"Mother, I think I could learn it a lot better out doors than in this dark room."

"All right, dear," she said, "if you're sure you won't let anything distract you."

"No, Mother, I promise." And he went out by the big elm and stood under the Oriole's nest. "The boy stood on the burning deck Whence all but he had fled."

That is the way it began and he started:

"The boy stood on the burning deck"—then he had to stop, for Mr. Stuck-up, the Tur-

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key, was taking his afternoon parade right near him. Mr. Stuckup didn't seem to like that piece at all. Neither did Jehosophat, for that matter.

"The boy"—he began again.

"Gobble, gobble," shrieked the Turkey.

"Stood on the burning—"

"Gobble, gobble," again rudely interrupted Mr. Stuckup.

So Jehosophat went around to the side of the house by the Lilac Bush. He stood up straight and tried it all over again.

"The boy stood on the burning deck'—get down, get down!" he yelled. Now that was strange. It sounded as if he were telling the boy to get down off that deck. But it was only Wienerwurst he was talking to. For, when he made that fine gesture which Teacher had shown them, Wienerwurst, who had crept up behind him, thought his master was playing some game, and jumped up at his outstretched fingers.

So once more Jehosophat picked up his reader, and walked over to the Crying Tree, whose green willow branches trailed in the Pond.

He practised his fine bow for a while, then began. This time he actually got through the first verse all right, and was quite pleased with himself. But no sooner had he stopped than he heard behind him—

A loud

"HISS! HISS!"

Now it isn't pleasant to try to make a good speech, and have some one hiss you when they ought to be clapping their hands. But that is just what The Foolish White Geese were doing to Jehosophat.

Once more he picked up his reader, and marched way up the Brook. He had just begun the lines all over again when Miss Cross Patch the Guinea Hen ran out from behind the barn and screeched horribly—just as he was making that fine gesture, too.

"GAWKE'E!—GAWKE'E!—GAWKE'E!"

Now to be called gawky when he thought the gesture was particularly graceful, was indeed discouraging. And, to add to his discomfort, when he tried it again—for the hundredth time, it seemed—the cows in the pasture stretched their red muzzles over the bars and called:

"BOOOOOOO!"

—just as if they wanted him to stop. And the horses whinnied:

"FUNN-NN-NN-NNY!"

It was no use, so Jehosophat rushed into the house again, stuffed some cotton in his ears, and went up in the attic, where he was sure he wouldn't be disturbed.

Here he succeeded pretty well, and had learned two verses, and the name—which was quite important—when the supper bell rang. So he felt he had earned that nice glass of creamy milk, and the big slice of gingerbread, especially the thick chocolate icing on top. It was an extra thick piece, too, which Mother gave him, probably as a prize for all his hard work.

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Next morning, on the way to school, he was reciting Casabianca for practice. He tried it on the Purple Crackles that flew in the fields by the blackberry bushes; the little Gold Finches that swayed on the grasses; and the topknotted Kingbirds on the telegraph wires overhead.

And he thought he was getting on pretty well with “The boy stood on the burning deck,” when a voice took the second line right out of his mouth:

“Eating peanuts by the peck!!!!”

Angrily he turned, and there were Fatty Hamm and Reddy Toms, Dicky Means too, and Lizzie Fizzletree, all making faces at him and mocking him with funny gestures. Surely no teacher ever taught gestures like those.

They began it all over again, reciting together. And this is the piece they made of it—you never would have recognized poor Casabianca at all:

“The boy stood on the burning deck

Eating peanuts by the peck.

His father called, he would not go

Because he loved his peanuts so!!!”

“Stop,” yelled Jehosophat, “that isn’t it at all.”

“‘Tis, too,” shouted Fatty and the others together, and they repeated in one breath, as fast as they could:

“‘Sfathercalled andewouldn’tgo

Causeeloved ‘ispeanutsso.”

Yes, every time Jehosophat tried to tell them what it really was, they kept shouting in singsong voices, faster and faster:

“Fathercalled ‘ewoodengo

Causeeloved ‘ispeanutsso.”

And every once in a while that little imp Lizzie Fizzletree would make outrageous bows, almost down to the ground, in imitation of Jehosophat.

Next day was the day, the great day. And all the boys came dressed in new suits, or suits made over from Father’s old trousers, with stiff collars, and ties of red, or blue, or brown; and the girls had pretty white dresses with sashes sticking out like butterflies’ wings.

Jehosophat thought they did resemble butterflies until he looked down at their feet; and then very crossly he decided that those feet spoiled “the effect .” You see, he was getting to use and to think in big words now.

But while he was looking at the regiment of feet, along came Mr. Humbleby, the Presidentboardeducation, and all the County Trustees, and the proud parents from near and from far. You could see a long line of buggies and surries and carryalls lined against the fence.

Then the signal was given, and the Teacher took her pointer and rose, and the scholars smoothed their sashes, or their hair, and rose, too; and one and all sang,—

“My country, ‘tis of thee.”

Then there were more songs by Theentireschool and pieces by the scholars. Lizzie Fizzle-

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tree tried one all about flowers. “The Fringed Gentian,” it was called, and it was very pretty. But when Lizzie got through with it, Jehosophat didn’t think it was so beautiful. She recited it something like this:

“Dear flo’wr so cal’m and pu’re and bri’ght That op’nest in’ the qu’i-et nig’ht.”

And as she recited it she made gestures in all directions, first to one side, then to the other, just such floppy gestures as Ole Man Scarecrow would have made. That is, sometimes they looked like that, and sometimes her arms looked like the arms of a windmill. And her frizzy pigtails swished around with her arms—just like the sails of a windmill that had suddenly gone mad. The people started to titter, and Jehosophat started to giggle with them, when suddenly he thought of his own plight, and little shivers ran up and down his back, and his face felt very flushed and warm.

Then there were more songs by “Theentireschool”—and more pieces. My, would they never end! And then there were speeches by the Presidentboardeducation and the Trustees, who seemed to appreciate the privilege more than most of the pupils, Jehosophat thought, for they never stopped when they had the chance.

He looked out of the window. Over by the orchard, he could hear a flicker go “Rat-a-tat-tat,” boring away at the old apple tree. The sun was shining nice and warm, and he wondered if he couldn’t climb up on his seat, and drop out of the open window, and run away ever so far. He was supposed to “do his parents proud”; and if there was anything he hated, it was “doing somebody proud.” Oh, golly!

“The boy stood on the burning deck.”

Once or twice he repeated it to himself. Yes, he knew it all right. But just then Fatty Hamm, who sat behind him, leaned over and whispered,—

“Don’t forget the peanuts, Joshy!”

Jhosophat frowned and tried not to pay any attention, but the Presidentboardeducation had taken out his spectacles and was reading from a paper.

“Recitation by——.” He couldn’t seem to understand the name and put on his glasses a little nearer the end of his nose,

“Recitation by Je-hos-o-phat Green !”

How loud it sounded!

The Presidentboardeducation was looking all over the room.

“Come, come,” he said, “where is Jehosophat?”

Now that boy couldn’t rise, for the tail of his jacket had slid down in the crack of the seat, and Fatty Hamm was holding it tight so he couldn’t even move.

Again the spectacles of the Presidentboardeducation looked over the children in grave surprise. They lighted on Jehosophat.

“Come, come, my little man, there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

And the Presidentboardeducation smiled on him, with that sort of smile “grownups” always put on when they’re going to “do something for your good,” like pulling a tooth, for instance, or offering you castor oil.

There was a drone, too, of voices like the bees outside, and all eyes were looking at him.

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He didn't dare look at his mother, who was hoping so hard that he would "do her proud," or at his father, either. But he did glance once at the Toyman, who was sitting, looking very uncomfortable, in a boiled shirt and a stiff collar that almost choked his adam's apple. His hair was slicked down extra tight, too, and he kept gazing down into his new store hat. He felt very sorry for himself, and even sorrier for Jehosophat.

But the Presidentboardeducation was saying,—

"Come, come," again, and then,—

"Tut, tut!"

And all-of-a-sudden Fatty let go of his coat, and Jehosophat found himself on his feet and on his way to the platform.

He wanted to take a little of the glass of water that stood by the Presidentboardeducation—just one little sip—for his throat felt so dry and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. But he couldn't.

He made the fine bow all right, and Mother looked at Father as much as to say,—

"There, I knew our boy could do it."

And wonderfully he got through the first line,— "The boy stood on the burning deck."

But then he just had to look at Fatty, and Fatty had just put a peanut up to his mouth—as a sort of signal, I guess.

"The boy stood on the burning deck," repeated Jehosophat, forgetting the next line, and so having to stick to the first. He couldn't think of anything but Fatty's grinning mouth and that peanut.

"The boy stood on the burning deck," he called, louder than before.

"The boy stood on the burning deck," still louder.

"Yes, yes, my little man," said the Presidentboardeducation, still with that smile that Jehosophat hated so, and before he knew it he was shouting right back at the spectacles:—

"Eating peanuts by the peck.

His father called 'e wouldngo

Causehelovedispeanutssso!"

Yes sir, he shouted the last line oh, so loud, like a little bull, right in the Presidentboardeducation's face. And the Presidentboardeducation was so startled that he almost knocked the pitcher of water off the table. And the teacher's glasses fell off her nose, and she seemed to be unable to find them in her embarrassment—and then—the whole audience roared till the walls of the little Red Schoolhouse echoed to their laughter, and Jehosophat saw Fatty slapping his fat legs in delight.

Meanwhile, Jehosophat wasn't losing any time. He just hurried to the window, climbed up on the seat, then on the sill, and dropped on the soft grass below, and ran up the road towards home, just as fast as he could travel.

He hadn't gone far when he heard someone calling,—

"Hey, Sonny!"

He turned with relief.

There was the Toyman, his long legs fast catching up with the runaway. And the same old

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smile was on the Toyman's face.

And when the long legs had caught up with the short ones, the Toyman put his arm around the boy's shoulders, and they walked along like—well, like two old chums.

What was finest, too, was that he never mentioned the cause of Jehosophat's trouble and embarrassment, which is what no really true friend ever should do.

At last Jehosophat asked,—

“Where we goin’?”

“Let's go fishin'—I hate speeches,” the Toyman replied.

“I made a silly, a fool of myself, didn't I?” said Jehosophat.

“Not by a long sight,” the Toyman replied. “You see, sonny,” he went on to explain, very soberly, “that's an old piece of yours and out of date. Now they're making new arrangements and editions of books and po'try all the time. They just change with the times. And yours is a heap better than the old piece, anyway you look at it.”

Jehosophat wasn't quite so sure. But, anyway, they had a great time “fishin'.”