

My Red Cap

By

Louisa May Alcott

"He who serves well need not fear to ask his wages."

I

It was under a blue cap that I first saw the honest face of Joe Collins. In the third year of the late war a Maine regiment was passing through Boston, on its way to Washington. The Common was all alive with troops and the spectators who clustered round them to say God-speed, as the brave fellows marched away to meet danger and death for our sakes.

Every one was eager to do something; and, as the men stood at ease, the people mingled freely with them, offering gifts, hearty grips of the hand, and hopeful prophecies of victory in the end. Irresistibly attracted, my boy Tom and I drew near, and soon, becoming excited by the scene, ravaged the fruit-stands in our neighborhood for tokens of our regard, mingling candy and congratulations, peanuts and prayers, apples and applause, in one enthusiastic jumble.

While Tom was off on his third raid, my attention was attracted by a man who stood a little apart, looking as if his thoughts were far away. All the men were fine, stalwart fellows, as Maine men usually are; but this one overtopped his comrades, standing straight and tall as a Norway pine, with a face full of the mingled shrewdness, sobriety, and self-possession of the typical New Englander. I liked the look of him; and, seeing that he seemed solitary, even in a crowd, I offered him my last apple with a word of interest. The keen blue eyes met mine gratefully, and the apple began to vanish in vigorous bites as we talked; for no one thought of ceremony at such a time.

"Where are you from?"

"Woolidge, ma'am."

"Are you glad to go?"

"Wal, there's two sides to that question. I calk'late to do my duty, and do it hearty: but it is rough on a feller leavin' his folks, for good, maybe."

There was a sudden huskiness in the man's voice that was not apple-skins, though he tried to make believe that it was. I knew a word about home would comfort him, so I went on with my questions.

"It is very hard. Do you leave a family?"

"My old mother, a sick brother,--and Lucindy."

The last word was uttered in a tone of intense regret, and his brown cheek reddened as he added hastily, to hide some embarrassment.--

"You see, Jim went last year, and got pretty well used up; so I felt as if I'd ought to take my turn now. Mother was a regular old hero about it and I dropped everything, and come off. Lucindy didn't think it was my duty; and that made it awful hard, I tell you."

"Wives are less patriotic than mothers," I began; but he would not hear Lucindy blamed, and said quickly,--

"She ain't my wife yet, but we calk'lated to be married in a month or so; and it was wus for her than for me, women lot so on not being disappointed. I couldn't shirk, and here I be. When I git to work, I shall be all right: the first wrench is the tryin' part."

Here he straightened his broad shoulders, and turned his face toward the flags fluttering far in front, as if no backward look should betray the longing of his heart for mother, home, and wife. I liked that little glimpse of

character; and when Tom returned with empty hands, reporting that every stall was exhausted, I told him to find out what the man would like best, then run across the street and get it.

"I know without asking. Give us your purse, and I'll make him as happy as a king," said the boy, laughing, as he looked up admiringly at our tall friend, who looked down on him with an elder-brotherly air pleasant to see. While Tom was gone, I found out Joe's name and business, promised to write and tell his mother how finely the regiment went off, and was just expressing a hope that we might meet again, for I too was going to the war as nurse, when the order to "Fall in!" came rolling down the ranks, and the talk was over. Fearing Tom would miss our man in the confusion, I kept my eye on him till the boy came rushing up with a packet of tobacco in one hand and a good supply of cigars in the other. Not a romantic offering, certainly, but a very acceptable one, as Joe's face proved, as we scrambled these treasures into his pockets, all laughing at the flurry, while less fortunate comrades helped us, with an eye to a share of these fragrant luxuries by and by. There was just time for this, a hearty shake of the big hand, and a grateful "Good-by, ma'am;" then the word was given, and they were off. Bent on seeing the last of them, Tom and I took a short cut, and came out on the wide street down which so many troops marched that year; and, mounting some high steps, we watched for our man, as we already called him.

As the inspiring music, the grand tramp, drew near, the old thrill went through the crowd, the old cheer broke out. But it was a different scene now than in the first enthusiastic, hopeful days. Young men and ardent boys filled the ranks then, brave by instinct, burning with loyal zeal, and blissfully unconscious of all that lay before them. Now the blue coats were worn by mature men, some gray, all grave and resolute: husbands and fathers, with the memory of wives and children tugging at their heart-strings; homes left desolate behind them, and before them the grim certainty of danger, hardship, and perhaps the lifelong helplessness worse than death. Little of the glamour of romance about the war now: they saw it as it was, a long, hard task; and here were the men to do it well. Even the lookers-on were different now. Once all was wild enthusiasm and glad uproar; now men's lips were set, and women's smileless as they cheered; fewer handkerchiefs whitened the air, for wet eyes needed them; and sudden lulls, almost solemn in their stillness, followed the acclamations of the crowd. All watched with quickened breath and brave souls that living wave,

blue below, and bright with a steely glitter above, as it flowed down the street and away to distant battle-fields already stained with precious blood.

"There he is! The outside man, and tallest of the lot. Give him a cheer, auntie: he sees us, and remembers!" cried Tom, nearly tumbling off his perch, as he waved his hat, and pointed out Joe Collins.

Yes, there he was, looking up, with a smile on his brave brown face, my little nosegay in his button-hole, a suspicious bulge in the pocket close by, and doubtless a comfortable quid in his mouth, to cheer the weary march. How like an old friend he looked, though we had only met fifteen minutes ago; how glad we were to be there to smile back at him, and send him on his way feeling that, even in a strange city, there was some one to say, "God bless you, Joe!" We watched the tallest blue cap till it vanished, and then went home in a glow of patriotism,--Tom to long for his turn to come, I to sew vigorously on the gray gown the new nurse burned to wear as soon as possible, and both of us to think and speak often of poor Joe Collins and his Lucindy. All this happened long ago; but it is well to recall those stirring times,--to keep fresh the memory of sacrifices made for us by men like these; to see to it that the debt we owe them is honestly, gladly paid; and, while we decorate the graves of those who died, to remember also those who still live to deserve our grateful care.

II

I never expected to see Joe again; but, six months later, we did meet in a Washington hospital one winter's night. A train of ambulances had left their sad freight at our door, and we were hurrying to get the poor fellows into much needed beds, after a week of hunger, cold, and unavoidable neglect. All forms of pain were in my ward that night, and all borne with the pathetic patience which was a daily marvel to those who saw it.

Trying to bring order out of chaos, I was rushing up and down the narrow aisle between the rows of rapidly filling beds, and, after brushing several times against a pair of the largest and muddiest boots I ever saw, I paused at last to inquire why they were impeding the passageway. I found they belonged to a very tall man who seemed to be already asleep or dead, so

white and still and utterly worn out he looked as he lay there, without a coat, a great patch on his forehead, and the right arm rudely bundled up. Stooping to cover him, I saw that he was unconscious, and, whipping out my brandy-bottle and salts, soon brought him round, for it was only exhaustion.

"Can you eat?" I asked, as he said, "Thanky, ma'am," after a long draught of water and a dizzy stare.

"Eat! I'm starvin'!" he answered, with such a ravenous glance at a fat nurse who happened to be passing, that I trembled for her, and hastened to take a bowl of soup from her tray.

As I fed him, his gaunt, weather-beaten face had a familiar look; but so many such faces had passed before me that winter, I did not recall this one till the ward-master came to put up the cards with the new-comers' names above their beds. My man seemed absorbed in his food; but I naturally glanced at the card, and there was the name "Joseph Collins" to give me an additional interest in my new patient.

"Why, Joe! is it really you?" I exclaimed, pouring the last spoonful of soup down his throat so hastily that I choked him.

"All that's left of me. Wal, ain't this luck, now?" gasped Joe, as gratefully as if that hospital-cot was a bed of roses.

"What is the matter? A wound in the head and arm?" I asked, feeling sure that no slight affliction had brought Joe there.

"Right arm gone. Shot off as slick as a whistle. I tell you, it's a sing'lar kind of a feelin' to see a piece of your own body go flyin' away, with no prospect of ever coming back again," said Joe, trying to make light of one of the greatest misfortunes a man can suffer.

"That is bad, but it might have been worse. Keep up your spirits, Joe; and we will soon have you fitted out with a new arm almost as good as new."

"I guess it won't do much lumberin', so that trade is done for. I s'pose there's things left-handed fellers can do, and I must learn 'em as soon as possible, since my fightin' days are over," and Joe looked at his one arm with a sigh that was almost a groan, helplessness is such a trial to a manly man,--and he was eminently so.

"What can I do to comfort you most, Joe? I'll send my good Ben to help you to bed, and will be here myself when the surgeon goes his rounds. Is there anything else that would make you more easy?"

"If you could just drop a line to mother to let her know I'm alive, it would be a sight of comfort to both of us. I guess I'm in for a long spell of hospital, and I'd lay easier if I knew mother and Lucindy warn't frettin' about me."

He must have been suffering terribly, but he thought of the women who loved him before himself, and, busy as I was, I snatched a moment to send a few words of hope to the old mother. Then I left him "layin' easy," though the prospect of some months of wearing pain would have daunted most men. If I had needed anything to increase my regard for Joe, it would have been the courage with which he bore a very bad quarter of an hour with the surgeons; for his arm was in a dangerous state, the wound in the head feverish for want of care; and a heavy cold on the lungs suggested pneumonia as an added trial to his list of ills.

"He will have a hard time of it, but I think he will pull through, as he is a temperate fellow, with a splendid constitution," was the doctor's verdict, as he left us for the next man, who was past help, with a bullet through his lungs.

"I don't no as I hanker to live, and be a burden. If Jim was able to do for mother, I feel as if I wouldn't mind steppin' out now I'm so fur along. As he

ain't, I s'pose I must brace up, and do the best I can," said Joe, as I wiped the drops from his forehead, and tried to look as if his prospect was a bright one.

"You will have Lucindy to help you, you know; and that will make things easier for all."

"Think so? 'Pears to me I couldn't ask her to take care of three invalids for my sake. She ain't no folks of her own, nor much means, and ought to marry a man who can make things easy for her. Guess I'll have to wait a spell longer before I say anything to Lucindy about marryin' now;" and a look of resolute resignation settled on Joe's haggard face as he gave up his dearest hope.

"I think Lucindy will have something to say, if she is like most women, and you will find the burdens much lighter, for sharing them between you. Don't worry about that, but get well, and go home as soon as you can."

"All right, ma'am;" and Joe proved himself a good soldier by obeying orders, and falling asleep like a tired child, as the first step toward recovery.

For two months I saw Joe daily, and learned to like him very much, he was so honest, genuine, and kind-hearted. So did his mates, for he made friends with them all by sharing such small luxuries as came to him, for he was a favorite; and, better still, he made sunshine in that sad place by the brave patience with which he bore his own troubles, the cheerful consolation he always gave to others. A droll fellow was Joe at times, for under his sobriety lay much humor; and I soon discovered that a visit from him was more efficacious than other cordials in cases of despondency and discontent. Roars of laughter sometimes greeted me as I went into his ward, and Joe's jokes were passed round as eagerly as the water-pitcher.

Yet he had much to try him, not only in the ills that vexed his flesh, but the cares that tried his spirit, and the future that lay before him, full of anxieties and responsibilities which seemed so heavy now when the strong right arm,

that had cleared all obstacles away before, was gone. The letters I wrote for him, and those he received, told the little story very plainly; for he read them to me, and found much comfort in talking over his affairs, as most men do when illness makes them dependent on a woman. Jim was evidently sick and selfish. Lucindy, to judge from the photograph cherished so tenderly under Joe's pillow, was a pretty, weak sort of a girl, with little character or courage to help poor Joe with his burdens. The old mother was very like her son, and stood by him "like a hero," as he said, but was evidently failing, and begged him to come home as soon as he was able, that she might see him comfortably settled before she must leave him. Her courage sustained his, and the longing to see her hastened his departure as soon as it was safe to let him go; for Lucindy's letters were always of a dismal sort, and made him anxious to put his shoulder to the wheel.

"She always set consider'ble by me, mother did, bein' the oldest; and I wouldn't miss makin' her last days happy, not if it cost me all the arms and legs I've got," said Joe, as he awkwardly struggled into the big boots an hour after leave to go home was given him.

It was pleasant to see his comrades gather round him with such hearty adieus that his one hand must have tingled; to hear the good wishes and the thanks called after him by pale creatures in their beds; and to find tears in many eyes beside my own when he was gone, and nothing was left of him but the empty cot, the old gray wrapper, and the name upon the wall.

I kept that card among my other relics, and hoped to meet Joe again somewhere in the world. He sent me one or two letters, then I went home; the war ended soon after, time passed, and the little story of my Maine lumberman was laid away with many other experiences which made that part of my life a very memorable one.

III

Some years later, as I looked out of my window one dull November day, the only cheerful thing I saw was the red cap of a messenger who was examining the slate that hung on a wall opposite my hotel. A tall man with gray hair and beard, one arm, and a blue army-coat. I always salute, figuratively at

least, when I see that familiar blue, especially if one sleeve of the coat is empty; so I watched the messenger with interest as he trudged away on some new errand, wishing he had a better day and a thicker pair of boots. He was an unusually large, well-made man, and reminded me of a fine building going to ruin before its time; for the broad shoulders were bent, there was a stiffness about the long legs suggestive of wounds or rheumatism, and the curly hair looked as if snow had fallen on it too soon. Sitting at work in my window, I fell into the way of watching my Red Cap, as I called him, with more interest than I did the fat doves on the roof opposite, or the pert sparrows hopping in the mud below. I liked the steady way in which he plodded on through fair weather or foul, as if intent on doing well the one small service he had found to do. I liked his cheerful whistle as he stood waiting for a job under the porch of the public building where his slate hung, watching the luxurious carriages roll by, and the well-to-do gentlemen who daily passed him to their comfortable homes, with a steady, patient sort of face, as if wondering at the inequalities of fortune, yet neither melancholy nor morose over the small share of prosperity which had fallen to his lot.

I often planned to give him a job, that I might see him nearer; but I had few errands, and little Bob, the hall-boy, depended on doing those: so the winter was nearly over before I found out that my Red Cap was an old friend.

A parcel came for me one day, and bidding the man wait for an answer, I sat down to write it, while the messenger stood just inside the door like a sentinel on duty. When I looked up to give my note and directions, I found the man staring at me with a beaming yet bashful face, as he nodded, saying heartily,--

"I mistrusted it was you, ma'am, soon's I see the name on the bundle, and I guess I ain't wrong. It's a number of years sence we met, and you don't remember Joe Collins as well as he does you, I reckon?"

"Why, how you have changed! I've been seeing you every day all winter, and never knew you," I said, shaking hands with my old patient, and very glad to see him.

"Nigh on to twenty years makes consid'able of a change in folks, 'specially if they have a pretty hard row to hoe."

"Sit down and warm yourself while you tell me all about it; there is no hurry for this answer, and I'll pay for your time."

Joe laughed as if that was a good joke, and sat down as if the fire was quite as welcome as the friend.

"How are they all at home?" I asked, as he sat turning his cap round, not quite knowing where to begin.

"I haven't got any home nor any folks neither;" and the melancholy words banished the brightness from his rough face like a cloud. "Mother died soon after I got back. Suddin', but she was ready, and I was there, so she was happy. Jim lived a number of years, and was a sight of care, poor feller; but we managed to rub along, though we had to sell the farm: for I couldn't do much with one arm, and doctor's bills right along stiddy take a heap of money. He was as comfortable as he could be; and, when he was gone, it wasn't no great matter, for there was only me, and I don't mind roughin' it."

"But Lucindy, where was she?" I asked very naturally.

"Oh! she married another man long ago. Couldn't expect her to take me and my misfortins. She's doin' well, I hear, and that's a comfort anyway."

There was a look on Joe's face, a tone in Joe's voice as he spoke, that plainly showed how much he had needed comfort when left to bear his misfortunes all alone. But he made no complaint, uttered no reproach, and loyally excused Lucindy's desertion with a simple sort of dignity that made it impossible to express pity or condemnation.

"How came you here, Joe?" I asked, making a sudden leap from past to present.

"I had to scratch for a livin', and can't do much: so, after tryin' a number of things, I found this. My old wounds pester me a good deal, and rheumatism is bad winters; but, while my legs hold out, I can git on. A man can't set down and starve; so I keep waggin' as long as I can. When I can't do no more, I s'pose there's almshouse and hospital ready for me."

"That is a dismal prospect, Joe. There ought to be a comfortable place for such as you to spend your last days in. I am sure you have earned it."

"Wal, it does seem ruther hard on us when we've give all we had, and give it free and hearty, to be left to knock about in our old age. But there's so many poor folks to be took care of, we don't get much of a chance, for we ain't the beggin' sort," said Joe, with a wistful look at the wintry world outside, as if it would be better to lie quiet under the snow, than to drag out his last painful years, friendless and forgotten, in some refuge of the poor.

"Some kind people have been talking of a home for soldiers, and I hope the plan will be carried out. It will take time; but, if it comes to pass, you shall be one of the first men to enter that home, Joe, if I can get you there."

"That sounds mighty cheerin' and comfortable, thanky, ma'am. Idleness is dreadful tryin' to me, and I'd rather wear out than rust out; so I guess I can weather it a spell longer. But it will be pleasant to look forrard to a snug harbor bymeby. I feel a sight better just hearin' tell about it." He certainly looked so, faint as the hope was; for the melancholy eyes brightened as if they already saw a happier refuge in the future than almshouse, hospital, or grave, and, when he trudged away upon my errand, he went as briskly as if every step took him nearer to the promised home.

After that day it was all up with Bob, for I told my neighbors Joe's story, and we kept him trotting busily, adding little gifts, and taking the sort of interest in him that comforted the lonely fellow, and made him feel that he had not

outlived his usefulness. I never looked out when he was at his post that he did not smile back at me; I never passed him in the street that the red cap was not touched with a military flourish; and, when any of us beckoned to him, no twinge of rheumatism was too sharp to keep him from hurrying to do our errands, as if he had Mercury's winged feet.

Now and then he came in for a chat, and always asked how the Soldiers' Home was prospering; expressing his opinion that "Boston was the charitablest city under the sun, and he was sure he and his mates would be took care of somehow."

When we parted in the spring, I told him things looked hopeful, bade him be ready for a good long rest as soon as the hospitable doors were open, and left him nodding cheerfully.

IV

But in the autumn I looked in vain for Joe. The slate was in its old place, and a messenger came and went on his beat; but a strange face was under the red cap, and this man had two arms and one eye. I asked for Collins, but the new-comer had only a vague idea that he was dead; and the same answer was given me at headquarters, though none of the busy people seemed to know when or where he died. So I mourned for Joe, and felt that it was very hard he could not have lived to enjoy the promised refuge; for, relying upon the charity that never fails, the Home was an actual fact now, just beginning its beneficent career. People were waking up to this duty, money was coming in, meetings were being held, and already a few poor fellows were in the refuge, feeling themselves no longer paupers, but invalid soldiers honorably supported by the State they had served. Talking it over one day with a friend, who spent her life working for the Associated Charities, she said,--

"By the way, there is a man boarding with one of my poor women, who ought to be got into the Home, if he will go. I don't know much about him, except that he was in the army, has been very ill with rheumatic fever, and is friendless. I asked Mrs. Flanagin how she managed to keep him, and she said she had help while he was sick, and now he is able to hobble about, he

takes care of the children, so she is able to go out to work. He won't go to his own town, because there is nothing for him there but the almshouse, and he dreads a hospital; so struggles along, trying to earn his bread tending babies with his one arm. A sad case, and in your line; I wish you'd look into it."

"That sounds like my Joe, one arm and all. I'll go and see him; I've a weakness for soldiers, sick or well."

I went, and never shall forget the pathetic little tableau I saw as I opened Mrs. Flanagin's dingy door; for she was out, and no one heard my tap. The room was redolent of suds, and in a grove of damp clothes hung on lines sat a man with a crying baby laid across his lap, while he fed three small children standing at his knee with bread and molasses. How he managed with one arm to keep the baby from squirming on to the floor, the plate from upsetting, and to feed the hungry urchins who stood in a row with open mouths, like young birds, was past my comprehension. But he did, trotting baby gently, dealing out sweet morsels patiently, and whistling to himself, as if to beguile his labors cheerfully.

The broad back, the long legs, the faded coat, the low whistle were all familiar; and, dodging a wet sheet, I faced the man to find it was indeed my Joe! A mere shadow of his former self, after months of suffering that had crippled him for life, but brave and patient still; trying to help himself, and not ask aid though brought so low.

For an instant I could not speak to him, and, encumbered with baby, dish, spoon, and children, he could only stare at me with a sudden brightening of the altered face that made it full of welcome before a word was uttered.

"They told me you were dead, and I only heard of you by accident, not knowing I should find my old friend alive, but not well, I'm afraid?"

"There ain't much left of me but bones and pain, ma'am. I'm powerful glad to see you all the same. Dust off a chair, Patsey, and let the lady set down. You go in the corner, and take turns lickin' the dish, while I see company," said

Joe, disbanding his small troop, and shouldering the baby as if presenting arms in honor of his guest.

"Why didn't you let me know how sick you were? And how came they to think you dead?" I asked, as he festooned the wet linen out of the way, and prepared to enjoy himself as best he could.

"I did send once, when things was at the wust; but you hadn't got back, and then somehow I thought I was goin' to be mustered out for good, and so wouldn't trouble nobody. But my orders ain't come yet, and I am doing the fust thing that come along. It ain't much, but the good soul stood by me, and I ain't ashamed to pay my debts this way, sence I can't do it in no other;" and Joe cradled the chubby baby in his one arm as tenderly as if it had been his own, though little Bidy was not an inviting infant.

"That is very beautiful and right, Joe, and I honor you for it; but you were not meant to tend babies, so sing your last lullabies, and be ready to go to the Home as soon as I can get you there."

"Really, ma'am? I used to lay and kind of dream about it when I couldn't stir without yellin' out; but I never thought it would ever come to happen. I see a piece in the paper describing it, and it sounded dreadful nice. Shouldn't wonder if I found some of my mates there. They were a good lot, and deservin' of all that could be done for 'em," said Joe, trotting the baby briskly, as if the prospect excited him, as well it might, for the change from that damp nursery to the comfortable quarters prepared for him would be like going from Purgatory to Paradise.

"I don't wonder you don't get well living in such a place, Joe. You should have gone home to Woolwich, and let your friends help you," I said, feeling provoked with him for hiding himself.

"No, ma'am!" he answered, with a look I never shall forget, it was so full of mingled patience, pride, and pain. "I haven't a relation in the world but a couple of poor old aunts, and they couldn't do anything for me. As for asking

help of folks I used to know, I couldn't do it; and if you think I'd go to Lucindy, though she is wal off, you don't know Joe Collins. I'd die fust! If she was poor and I rich, I'd do for her like a brother; but I couldn't ask no favors of her, not if I begged my vittles in the street, or starved. I forgive, but I don't forgit in a hurry; and the woman that stood by me when I was down is the woman I believe in, and can take my bread from without shame. Hooray for Biddy Flanagin! God bless her!" and, as if to find a vent for the emotion that filled his eyes with grateful tears, Joe led off the cheer, which the children shrilly echoed, and I joined heartily.

"I shall come for you in a few days; so cuddle the baby and make much of the children before you part. It won't take you long to pack up, will it?" I asked, as we subsided with a general laugh.

"I reckon not as I don't own any clothes but what I set in, except a couple of old shirts and them socks. My hat's stoppin' up the winder, and my old coat is my bed-cover. I'm awful shabby, ma'am, and that's one reason I don't go out more. I can hobble some, but I ain't got used to bein' a scarecrow yet," and Joe glanced from the hose without heels that hung on the line to the ragged suit he wore, with a resigned expression that made me long to rush out and buy up half the contents of Oak Hall on the spot.

Curbing this wild impulse I presently departed with promises of speedy transportation for Joe, and unlimited oranges to assuage the pangs of parting for the young Flanagins, who escorted me to the door, while Joe waved the baby like a triumphal banner till I got round the corner.

There was such a beautiful absence of red tape about the new institution that it only needed a word in the right ear to set things going; and then, with a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull all together, Joe Collins was taken up and safely landed in the Home he so much needed and so well deserved.

A happier man or a more grateful one it would be hard to find, and if a visitor wants an enthusiastic guide about the place, Joe is the one to take, for all is comfort, sunshine, and good-will to him; and he unconsciously shows how great the need of this refuge is, as he hobbles about on his lame

feet, pointing out its beauties, conveniences, and delights with his one arm, while his face shines, and his voice quavers a little as he says gratefully,--

"The State don't forget us, you see, and this is a Home wuth havin'. Long life to it!"