

Old Johnny Appleseed

By Elizabeth Harrison

Many years ago on the sparsely settled prairies of America there lived an old man who was known by the queer name of "Johnny Appleseed" His wife had died long ago and his children had grown up and scattered to the corners of the earth. He had not even a home that he could call his own, but wandered about from place to place, with only a few friends and little or no money. His face was wrinkled, his hair was thin and grey, and his shoulders stooped. His clothes were old and ragged and his hat was old and shabby. Yet inside of him was a heart that was brave and true, and he felt that even he, old and poor as he was, could be of use in the world, because he loved his fellow-men, and love always finds something to do.

As he trudged along the lonely road from town to town, or made for himself a path through the unbroken forest, he often thought of the good God, and of how all men were children of the One Father. Sometimes he would burst out singing the words of a song which he had learned when he was a young man.

"Millions loving, I embrace you,
All the world this kiss I send!
Brothers, o'er yon starry tent
Dwells a God whose love is true!"

These words, by the way, are a part of a great poem you may some day read. And they once so stirred the heart of a great musician that he set them to the finest music the world has ever heard. And now the great thought of a loving God and the great music of a loving man comforted the lonely traveller.

The old man wandered about from village to village, which in those days were scattered far apart, with miles and miles of prairie land stretching between them, and sometimes woodland and rivers, too, separated one village from the next. At night he usually earned his crust of bread and lodgings by mending the teakettle or wash-boiler of some farmer's wife, or by soldering on the handle of her tin cup or the knob to her tea-pot, as he always carried in one of his coat pockets a small charcoal stove and a bit of solder. He always carried under his arm or over his shoulder a green baize bag, and when the mending was done he would oftentimes draw out of this green bag an old violin and begin to play, and the farmer, as well as his wife and the children, would gather around him and listen to his strange music.

Sometimes it was gay and sometimes it was sad, but always sweet. Sometimes he sang words that he himself had written, and sometimes the songs which had been written by the great masters. But mending broken tinware and playing an old violin were not the only things he did to help the world along. As he wandered from place to place he often noticed how rich the soil was, and he would say to himself, "Some day this will be a great country with thousands of people living on this land, and though I shall never see them, they may never read my verses or hear my name, still I can help them, and add some things to their lives."

So whenever a farmer's wife gave him an apple to eat he carefully saved every seed that lay hidden in the heart of the apple, and next day as he trudged along he would stoop down every now and then and plant a few of the seeds and then carefully cover them with the rich black soil of the prairie. Then he

would look up reverently to the sky and say, "I can but plant the seed, dear Lord, and Thy clouds may water them, but Thou alone can give the increase. Thou only can cause this tiny seed to grow into a tree whose fruit shall feed my fellow-men." Then the God-like love that would fill his heart at such a thought would cause his face to look young again, and his eyes to shine as an angel's eyes must shine, and oftentimes he would sing in clear rich tones—

"Millions loving, I embrace you,
All the world this kiss I send!
Brothers, o'er yon starry tent
Dwells a God whose love is true!"

And he knew that God dwelt in his heart as well as in the blue sky above.

When the cold winters came and the ground was frozen too hard for him to plant his apple seeds, he still saved them, and would often have a small bag full of them by the time that spring returned again. And this is how he came to be called "Old Johnny Appleseed."

Though nobody took very much notice of what he was doing, he still continued each day to plant apple seeds and each evening to play on his violin.

By-and-by his step grew slower and his shoulders drooped lower until at last his soul, which had always been strong and beautiful, passed out of his worn old body into the life beyond, and the cast-off body was buried by some villagers who felt kindly towards the old man, but who never dreamed that he had ever done any real service for them or their children. And soon his very name was forgotten. But the tiny apple seeds took root and began to grow, and each summer the young saplings grew taller and each winter they grew stronger, until at last they were young trees, and then they were old enough to bear apples. As people moved from the east out to the wild western prairies they naturally enough selected sites for building their homes near the fruitful apple trees, and in the springtime the young men gathered the blossoms for the young maidens to wear in their hair, and in the autumn the fathers gathered the ripe red and yellow apples to store away in their cellars for winter use, and the mothers made apple sauce and apple pies and apple dumplings of them, and all the year round the little children played under the shade of the apple trees, but none of them ever once thought of the old man who had planted for people he did not know, and who could never even thank him for his loving services.

Each apple that ripened bore in its heart a number of new seeds, some of which were planted and grew into fine orchards from which were gathered many barrels of apples. These were shipped farther west, until the Rocky Mountains were reached. In the centre of each apple shipped were more seeds, from which grew more apple trees, which bore the same kind of apples that the wrinkled old man in the shabby old clothes had planted long years before. So that many thousands of people have already been benefited by what the poor old man in the shabby old coat did, and thousands yet to come will enjoy the fruits of his labor.

It is true he never wore the armour of a great knight and never held the title of a great general. He never discovered a new world, nor helped his favorite to sit on the throne of a king. But perhaps after all, though ragged and poor, he was a hero, because in his heart he really and truly sang, as well as with his lips:

"Millions loving, I embrace you,
All the world this kiss I send!"

Brothers, o'er yon starry tent
Dwells a God whose love is true!"

For the greatest of all victories is to learn to love others even when they do not know it. This is to be God-like, and to be God-like is to be the greatest of heroes.

Source:

Harrison, Elizabeth. "Old Johnny Appleseed." *The Junior Classics, Volume Seven, Stories of Courage and Heroism*. Ed. William Patten. Electronic.