

AUNT MARY ANN

A Story of How the "Allowance" Was Made

By AGNES FAULKNER NELSON

"YOUNG man, will you fix my shutter?"

Clayton Sherron turned, perceived that he was the person addressed, and, taking off his hat with an elaborate bow, assured Aunt Mary Ann that he would be delighted to assist her. He was a fine, strapping youth, and Aunt Mary Ann's eyes followed him admiringly as he entered the store and mounted the stairs.

The wind had blown the shutter loose and it was slamming against the front of the house, threatening to break away from the remaining hinge. Aunt Mary Ann went out to the pavement again and craned her neck to see that it was properly done. Suddenly there was a crash and a ripping of canvas and Clayton Sherron landed in a box of Spanish onions.

Aunt Mary Ann, with wonderfully controlled nerves, glanced up at the torn awning and then down at the man and said:

"Jacob 'll be real mad about the awning."

Clayton looked up at her blankly.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" he gasped. "And I might have broken a leg."

At that moment a girl passed on the other side of the street. She was tall and willowy, dressed in a tailor-made costume of the latest style, and she held her head high on its long, stem-like neck. Her lips twitched and her eyes danced and yet, apparently, she also was quite unconscious of the comedy across the way.

Nevertheless, when he caught sight of her, Clayton Sherron blushed from chin to temple and hastily extricated himself from the box of Spanish onions.

"You're the new china store man, aint you?" drawled Aunt Mary Ann, catching up a lock of fluffy, snow-white hair with an invisible hair-pin. "I'm coming to see you one of these days."

Clayton assured her, with the best grace he could summon, that he would be glad of her patronage, relieved her mind by telling her he would order a new awning, and, with a bow a trifle less elaborate than his former one, took his departure.

That afternoon he was waiting on a customer who might take as long as she liked to choose a salad bowl, as far as he was concerned, or who might even depart without buying one at all, so long as she gave him an occasional fleeting glance from a pair of deep violet eyes, while he talked to her of Limoges and Crown Derby, when the door opened and Aunt Mary Ann came in. She wore an old-fashioned black velvet cape and Clayton noticed how stooped her shoulders were. He sprang to close the door after her, for he had been taught to honor and respect old age.

"Good-afternoon," said Aunt Mary Ann. "I came to look at bowls—no, not salad bowls; kitchen bowls. Why, how-do-you-do, Hilda? I declare I must be getting near-sighted; I didn't recognize you at first. By the way, I can kill two birds with one stone. I'm giving a little afternoon tea for Julia to-morrow and I'd like to have you come."

"Thank you," said Hilda demurely; "I shall be very pleased to come."

"My, what pretty cups you have, Mr. Sherron! If there's one thing I have a failing for, it's tea cups. But Jacob doesn't allow me to indulge my taste much in that direction." A dimple showed for a moment in her left cheek and then disappeared. "Say, but that's a beauty—that blue and gold one!"

She raised her hand to pick up the cup from the higher shelf and her cape brushed against a corner of the lower, knocking a Japanese cup to the floor and breaking it into fragments.

"Well now, that's too bad!" drawled Aunt Mary Ann, stepping back to survey the mischief she had done.

"Capes are such awkward things," said Hilda consolingly.

"I guess I'd better leave the cups alone and look at the bowls," rejoined Aunt Mary Ann with a little sigh.

Hilda indicated by a slight movement of the head that Clayton might serve the older lady first, and while Aunt Mary Ann selected her bowls she stood beside the table on which were displayed the salad bowls, quietly and unobtrusively, with her tall slimness seeming to efface herself entirely. Yet Clayton Sherron was every moment conscious of her presence and the faint odor of narcissus in the store.

After much deliberation Aunt Mary Ann finally chose two brown bowls.

"Fifteen cents for the two? Well, there's a quarter and you can keep the change to pay for the cup I broke."

"Oh, no," said Clayton courteously. "I wouldn't think of taking anything for it. It was merely an accident."

"But I'd rather pay for it," rejoined Aunt Mary Ann generously. Clayton put the dime back on the edge of the counter.

"But I insist," said Aunt Mary Ann.

"Madam, if you will pay for it, the cup was worth seventy-five cents."

"Seventy-five cents!" gasped Aunt Mary Ann. "That little thing!"

Clayton picked up a fragment from the floor and showed her the mark on it.

"Well, I do declare!" Her face twitched slightly and she opened her purse reluctantly. There's forty cents more. Will you call it square?"

"It's the wholesale price, madam. We'll call it square."

When she was gone and Clayton had closed the door behind her and returned to his first customer, Hilda glanced up at him curiously.

"Why did you do it?" she asked.

A slow flush crept under Clayton's tan.

"It wasn't the value of the cup," he replied, with lips firmly pressed together; "it was a matter of justice. Who is she anyway?"

"She's Mrs. Jacob Fairweather—commonly known as 'Aunt Mary Ann.' Her niece, Julia, whom she brought up, always called her that and I guess the name was contagious. They say she has a large bank account: she has been very saving all her life. But I thought you had met before?"

Clayton could not be sure whether Hilda's eyes twinkled or not; her lashes were so conveniently thick and long.

"It was under adverse circumstances," he replied drolly.

The following afternoon, Hilda Stratton, in her "best bib and tucker," rang the bell of Aunt Mary Ann's house door. Aunt Mary Ann answered the door herself and conducted her up a narrow flight of stairs to the parlor. It was considerably after the conventional hour of four and yet there were no other guests in the room and Hilda was not invited to remove her coat.

After some preliminary remarks on the weather, Hilda inquired carelessly where Julia was, and was informed that she had gone driving.

Hilda tried to veil her surprise, but there was an awkward pause or a moment or two while Aunt Mary Ann resumed her knitting. At last, looking up at Hilda with an odd expression in her eyes, she said:

"I'm afraid I made a mistake in the day. The tea ain't till to-morrow afternoon." Hilda flushed and then laughed softly.

"But it don't make any difference, of course," said Aunt Mary Ann. "Just you take off your coat and hat and you and me 'll have afternoon tea alone. Then you can come back to-morrow."

Hilda rose to remove her coat and Aunt Mary Ann glanced up admiringly at the silk dress that clung to her slender figure in long, graceful folds.

"My, but you do get the prettiest clothes, Hilda Stratton!" she exclaimed. "And to think you make 'em all your self! The man who gets you will get a clever girl—an economical one too for dressmakers' bills mount up these days. What do you think of the new china store man?" Hilda's cheeks burned a deep rose.

"He seems very nice," she replied.

"He's a fine young man. I wouldn't feel a bit sorry if Julia and he took a fancy to one another."

"Couldn't you come to our sewing-meeting now, on Wednesday?" said Aunt Mary Ann. "You could help us a lot with our work for the Indians." Hilda half promised.

"I'm coming to you for a donation, too. I have the collecting to do this year and I haven't been very successful so far. There's Mrs. Morgan—I asked her for something four weeks ago and she said she'd consider it. I guess she's still considering."

Hilda opened her bag and drew forth a dollar bill.

"I might as well give it to you now," she said. "Is that enough?"

"Well, I should say so," drawled Aunt Mary Ann. "I wish I could afford to give that much myself. I've an old cape up in the attic I thought I'd give 'em this year and an overcoat of Jacob's that he's worn for twelve years. It's a bit shabby but it'll keep some Indian warm. Before I was married I was a great hand at giving. It's mostly a matter of habit—giving—and I was brought up to it. But Jacob has always been rather close and I guess he's affected me some. You grow alike after you've been married awhile—unconsciously."

"We were married in March and after much coaxing I got Jacob to promise me I could give fifteen cents a Sunday to the church. I'll never forget that first Sunday in church. I kept the envelope in my muff until the collection was taken up, and when I drew it out Jacob glanced down at it suspiciously and says in a stage whisper:

"There's more'n fifteen cents in that envelope."

"I'm sure they heard him all around us; I felt terribly humiliated."

"There's a dollar eighty," I whispered back. "You begin to pay from the first of the year."

"He just grunted, but I knew he thought I hadn't been square—that I had sort of taken advantage of him. It made me more careful in the future."

Aunt Mary Ann knitted in silence for a few moments and Hilda watched the dimple play in her left cheek and wondered if she hadn't been pretty and alluring in those early days.

"Well, I'd better be steeping the tea," said Aunt Mary Ann. "I think there are some red coals on the kitchen stove, so I'll just make a couple of slices of toast." And she left the room, her slippers making a soft, shuffling noise on the carpet.

In a little while she returned with the toast and the tea and, spreading a large table napkin on one end of the marble-topped table, bade Hilda draw up her chair.

"We'll return thanks."

"I beg your pardon?" said Hilda, whose mind had been wandering.

"I'll just ask a blessing."

"Oh, yes." Hilda bowed her head. Her lips twitched a little.

"Well, I suppose," said Aunt Mary Ann in her peculiar twang, when at last Hilda rose to go. "We'll be hearing of your engagement one of these days? You're too bright a girl to stay single. But then, as my brother Sam used to say, when you get to supposin' you're pretty apt to suppose the wrong thing."

She laughed and Hilda joined in merrily.

"You never can tell," she rejoined, with a wise look.

"Well, there's just one bit of advice I'll give you, said Aunt Mary Ann: "And that is to marry a—"

"Good man?" said Hilda.

"No—a tall man. There's more trouble comes through not being able to look up to your husband than through anything else."

Four months later Hilda Sherron was preparing supper in her own home one night and listening for a familiar step on the walk as she set the table with her best Limoges tea set. Like the majority of men, her husband believed in using the best every day and letting company take the tag ends, and Hilda smiled as she thought of how easily she was slipping into her husband's grooves.

"You grow alike after you've been married awhile—unconsciously."

The thought ran through Hilda's mind and she wondered where she had heard it before. Suddenly she remembered and smiled: it was one of Aunt Mary Ann's sage remarks.

Any reference, in word or in thought, to Aunt Mary Ann invariably brought a smile to her lips these days. The poor old soul

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