

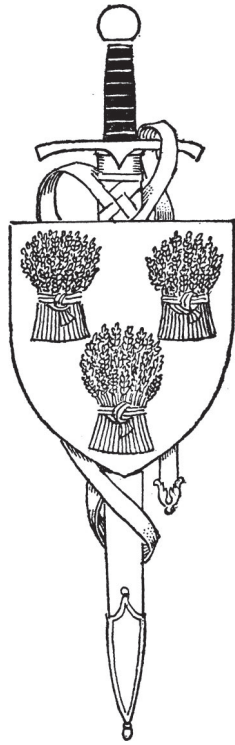
BIG JOHN'S SECRET

ALSO BY
ELEANORE M. JEWETT

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Big John's *secret*

by Eleanore M. Jewett



Illustrated by Frederick T. Chapman

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*This book is dedicated
to my husband,
Charles Harvey Jewett,
a physician who has shown me
that a doctor's life, consecrated
to his work, is nobler than that
of any knight in shining armor*

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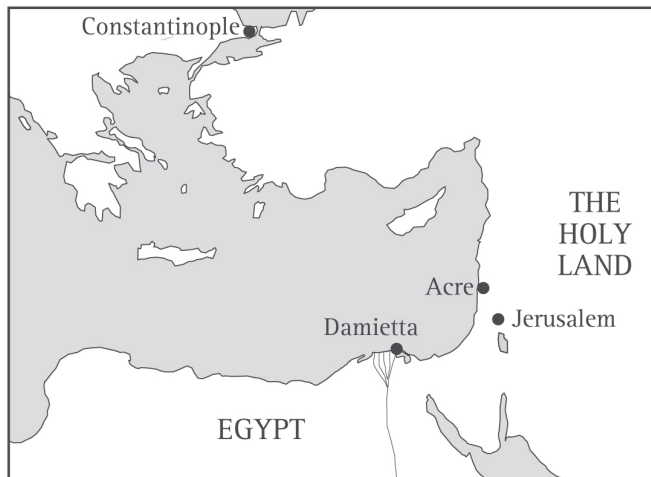
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John's Journey to Venice and Acre



Time of the 5th Crusade, 1218 A.D.



Big John's secret



I. BIG JOHN

BIG JOHN WAS working in his overlord's field near the bridge when a company of knights clattered over it. He straightened up and watched them. When the dust cleared he saw that they were many and wore costly clothing, gay with scarlet and gold. Squires and pages rode after them, and a few packhorses loaded with bundles and knobby, cloth-covered articles brought up the rear. Evidently they were well-born folk — nobles, perhaps even a baron and his friends, going to visit Sir Eustace, lord of the manor. John fol-

lowed them with his eyes until they reached the outer gates of the castle. Knights! How he wished he dared hope to be one someday. But miracles didn't happen often. It was the year 1215 and King John ruled over a restless and fear-filled England that clung to old customs and old ways because it felt insecure. John knew that a peasant lad would have small chance of growing up to be anything else. And yet — and yet — he could not help dreaming! Old Marm's stories and her strange teachings filled his mind and heart with secret hopes.

He bent to his work again, but only for a moment. With a swift clattering of hoofs, a belated rider and his squire galloped up over the bridge. The knight's horse stumbled and fell heavily, tried to get up, then lay back, panting. The knight himself had jumped free and was unhurt, but something ailed the horse. That was evident. John dropped the handle of his harrow and ran up onto the bridge. The squire had dismounted and gone to his lord but was pushed roughly aside.

"See to the horse!" the knight cried impatiently. "I fear me his ankle is broken. I should not have ridden him so soon after his injury."

John was already bending over the animal. It lay trembling in evident pain and could not bear to lay its forefoot on the ground. The boy felt gently along the leg and ankle. An old gash had broken open afresh and was bleeding freely, but John's careful probing gave no evidence of a broken bone.

The knight had approached and was watching him. "You handle the beast with a leech's skill," he said approvingly. "Have you knowledge enough to help me bind the leg so that Rowan can limp to the castle yonder?"

"Yes, my lord," answered John, and, taking the loose hem of his peasant tunic, he tore off strips of it and handed them to the squire, who soaked them in the cold water of the moat and then gave them to his master.

The squire did not offer to touch the injured horse himself, and stayed well away from his hoofs. John glanced at him wonderingly.

"He will be a good fighter someday," said the knight, indicating his attendant, "but my Rowan does not like him, and that counts to me as a point in his disfavor. Now come you, and help me. I trust the ankle is but sprained, not broken."

"I could feel no break, my lord," said John.

"And the beast let you handle him without disapproval? That is indeed a marvel!"

They soon had the ankle firmly bandaged and, with much scrambling and struggling, the big horse got to its three feet, holding the other awkwardly from the ground.

"Lead him slowly and gently. Have a care with him!" the knight commanded his squire, who took the bridle and moved cautiously away, leaving his own horse for his master to ride.

But the knight did not mount at once. He stood looking at Big John, staring at him with a puzzled expression. "Who are you, boy?" he asked at length. "And are you serf-born and bound to my Lord Eustace's land?"

"My name is John, and — no, my lord, I am a villein but not bound. We are free, with a payment of work service."

"We?" questioned the knight. "Do you mean you and your father?"

"Nay, not my father. I live with — Old Marm, who is — who is —" John was plainly uncomfortable. He left his sentence unfinished and fumbled with the torn edge of his tunic, not looking at the lord directly.

"Is your father dead?"

"I — I — know not, my lord."

"What was — or is — his name?"

"I know not, my lord."

There was a pause. The knight's eyes were fastened on John's face, and he looked not only puzzled but a little troubled. "And — Old Marm, who might she be?" he asked.

"She is an herb woman and she is wise with simples and medicine and — and she heals the sick." John's embarrassment vanished and he spoke now with pride. The knight cut him short. "But what is she to you?" he asked.

"Indeed, sir knight, I know not exactly, save that she hath reared me and cared for me and — been mother and father to me — and — I love her." He ended staunchly, even defiantly.

The knight smiled for the first time since the beginning of their conversation. "Tell her for me that she hath done well with you. How old are you, boy? I should say you were overyoung to be doing full peasant labor." His keen eyes sized up the lad's big frame, his easy carriage and evident strength, and rested for a moment on his hands, which were long-fingered and sensitive-looking, in spite of the roughness of toil.

"I am twelve," said John, "and the hayward thought

me able to do grown peasant's work, and that I am. They call me Big John in the village."

The knight swung onto his squire's horse but turned again to the boy before he moved away.

"Tell your Old Marm you remind me of someone — someone I once knew and loved." Then he touched his horse with his stirrups and was gone.

John stood for a moment as if rooted to the spot. Then he turned and started to run down the road, his one thought being that he must get to Old Marm at once and tell her. A shout brought him to a quick stop. Over in the lord's field the hayward was motioning to him with an angry sweep of his arm.

"Come back, you good-for-naught!" he thundered. " 'Tis not even time for the morning meal which Lord Eustace provides — in his bounty and goodness — for all you lazy oafs."

John was already back and had picked up the handle of his harrow. The hayward came striding over the ridged furrows and shook his fist at him. "How dared you leave your work?" he stormed.

"The knight's horse fell," muttered John.

"Was there not a squire in attendance?"

John did not answer. He began his harrowing.

"What did the knight say to you?"

Evidently the overseer was curious. The boy could not conceal a little smile. "Something about the horse," he said vaguely. "His leg had been injured before. It might have been broken — and the horse did not like the squire."

The man guffawed harshly. "So his lordship preferred the aid of the yarb woman's offspring! Faith,

what are we coming to when horseflesh can dictate to the gentry!" He went off about his business, chuckling over his own heavy wit.

The boy heaved a sigh of relief and went back to his excited thinking. The knight had been interested in *him* — John — and had seen or imagined a resemblance! The boy's hands went cold at the thought as he remembered every question he had been asked and his own answers. He was not a young knight; quite old, John guessed. Perhaps — perhaps —

It seemed to him that the workday would never end and leave him free to get back to Old Marm! He worked feverishly, clumsily, at first, so that the harrow handle slipped from his fingers. But the overseer had moved some distance away and did not notice him.

At about eleven o'clock the villeins stopped their work and gathered under the shade of some willow trees at the edge of the field, to eat the noonday meal that the house servants had brought out from the manor kitchen. Good food it was — thick turnip soup, black bread, and cheese. John ate his share quickly, sitting a little apart from the others, scarcely noticing what he put into his mouth. There would be at least four more hours of work before he could get back to Old Marm. He sighed as he picked up his harrow again and gently goaded the oxen. This was boon work the peasants were doing, an extra service the lord of the manor had a right to demand of them all at spring planting and again at harvest time. John should not complain, but the work irked him, especially now, when his mind teemed with thoughts and imaginings of a life he had never glimpsed in reality, but of which Old Marm had

told him endless tales.

At long last the day's task was over. John laid aside his heavy harrow, cared for the oxen, and, without a word to anyone, rushed off down the road, through the manor village, and home.

Home was scarcely more than a hovel built of dried reeds and sun-baked clay — “wattles and daub,” people called it — and roofed with a thatch of rushes easy to come by in the marshy fen country. It had a heavy door but no windows. The small patch of ground around it was neat and orderly, not littered with refuse as so many of the peasant homes were, and it was planted with rows of herbs, roughly fenced and protected against the pigs and chickens that wandered freely about.

John threw open the door and dashed in, then turned and closed it carefully behind him. In the dim interior a small peat fire burned, the smoke circling about until it found the hole in the roof intended for its exit. A black kettle full of herbs was brewing over the fire and gave off an aromatic smell, stinging but not unpleasant. Crouched over it, stirring it, was a gray-haired woman in the usual shapeless peasant dress — fustian, of course — belted at the waist by a frayed piece of rope.

She turned with a warm smile and John caught her in his strong arms, lifting her to her feet. “Marm,” he cried excitedly, “what think you? A knight, or great lord maybe, accosted me. He questioned me — who I was, my father's name, and was I born free. Oh, Marm, could it mean — anything?” He stood away from her, eagerly gazing down into her face. “Marm” — his voice