

**AUNT LINDY: A STORY FOUNDED ON REAL LIFE**

**By Victoria Earle [Matthews]**

In the annals of Fort Valley, Georgia, few events will last longer in the minds of her slow, easy-going dwellers than the memory of a great conflagration that left more than half the town a complete waste. 'Twas generally conceded to be the most disastrous fire that even her oldest residents had ever witnessed. It was caused, as far as could be ascertained, by some one who, while passing through the sampling room of the Cotton Exchange, had thoughtlessly tossed aside a burning match; this, embedding itself in the soft fleecy cotton, burned its way silently, without smoke, through the heart of a great bale to the flooring beneath, before it was discovered.

Although the watchman made his regular rounds an hour or so after the building closed for the night, yet he saw nothing to indicate the treacherous flame which was then, like a serpent, stealing its way through the soft snowy cotton. But now a red glare, a terrified cry

of "Fire! Fire!" echoing on the still night air, had aroused the unconscious sleepers, and summoned quickly, strong, brave-hearted men from every direction, who, as though with one accord, fell to fighting the fire-fiend (modern invention was unknown in this out-of-the-way settlement); even the women flocked to the scene, not knowing how soon a helping hand would be needed.

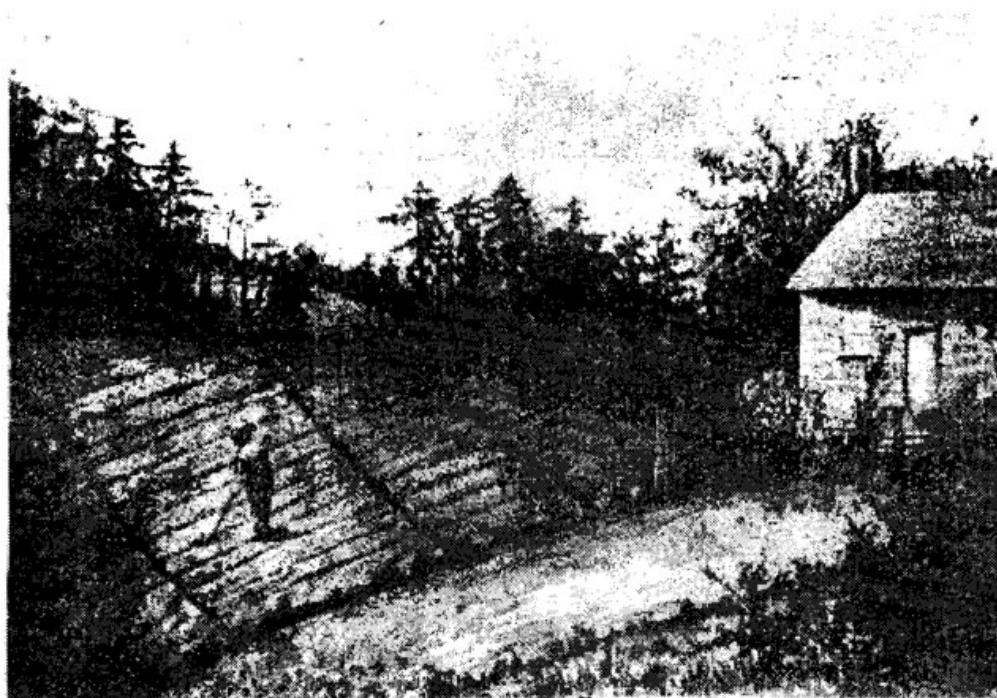
Great volumes of black smoke arose from the fated building, blinding and choking the stout fellows who had arranged themselves in small squads on the roofs of adjacent dwellings to check, if possible, the progress of the fire, while others in line passed water to them.

As the night wore on, a rising wind fanned the fiery tongue into a fateful blaze; and, as higher rose the wind, fiercer grew the flame; from every window and doorway poured great tongues of fire, casting a lurid glare all over the valley, with its shuddering groups of mute, frightened white faces, and its shrieking, prayerful, terror-stricken negroes, whose religion, being of a highly emotional character, was easily rendered devotional by any unusual excitement: their agonized "'Mity Gawd! he'p us pore sinners," chanted in doleful tones, as only the emotional Southern negro can chant or moan, but added to the weird, wild scene. Men and women with blanched faces looked anxiously at each other; piercing screams rent the air, as some child, relative, or loved one was missed, for, like a curse, the consuming fire passed from house to house, leaving nothing in its track but the blackened and charred remains of what had been, but a few short hours before, "home."

All through the night the fire raged, wasting its force as the early morning light gradually penetrated the smoky haze, revealing to the wellnigh frantic people a sad, sad scene of desolation. When home has been devastated, hearts only may feel and know the extent of the void; no pen or phrase can estimate it.

As the day advanced, sickening details of the night's horror were brought to light. Magruder's Tavern, the only hotel the quaint little town could boast of, served as a death trap; several perished in the flames; many were hurt by falling beams; some jumped from windows and lay maimed for life; others stood in shuddering groups, homeless, but thankful withal that their lives had been spared: as the distressed were found, neighbors who had escaped the scourge threw wide their doors and bestirred themselves to give relief to the sufferers, and temporary shelter to those who had lost all. Ah! let unbelievers cavil and contend, yet such a time as this proves that there is a mystic vein running through humanity that is not deduced from the mechanical laws of nature.

A silver-haired man, a stranger in the town, had been taken to a humble cot where many children in innocent forgetfulness passed noisily to and fro, unconscious that quiet meant life to the aged sufferer. Old Dr. Bronson, with his great heart and gentle, childlike manner, stood doubly thoughtful as he numbered the throbbing pulse. "His brain won't--can't bear it unless he's nursed and has perfect quiet," he murmured as he quitted the house. Acting upon a sudden thought, he sprang into his buggy and quickly drove through the shady lanes, by the redolent orchards, to a lone cabin on the outskirts of the town, situated at the entrance to the great sighing pine-woods.



Seeing a man weeding a small garden plot, he called, without alighting, "Hi there, Joel: where's Aunt Lindy?"

"Right dar, in de cabin, doctor; jes wait a minnit," as he disappeared through the doorway.

"Good day, Aunt Lindy," as a tall, ancient-looking negro dame hurried from the cabin to the gate. Well accustomed was she to these sudden calls of Dr. Bronson, for her fame as a nurse was known far beyond the limits of Fort Valley.

"Mawning, doctor; Miss Martha and de chil'en was not teched by de fi'er?" she inquired anxiously.

"Oh, no; the fire was not our way. Lindy, I have a bad case, and nowhere to take him. Mrs. Bronson has her hands full of distressed, suffering children. No one to nurse him, so I want to bring him here--a victim of the great fire."

"De Lawd, doctor, yo kin, yo kno' yo kin; de cabin is pore, but Joel ner me ain't heathins; fetch him right along, my han's ain't afeered of wuk when trubble comes."

Tenderly they lifted him, and bore him from the cottage resounding with childish prattle and glee, to the quiet, cleanly cabin of the lonely couple, Lindy and Joel, who years before had seen babes tom from their breasts and sold--powerless to utter a complaint or appeal, whipped for the tears they shed, knowing their children would return to them not again till the graves gave up their dead. But in the busy life that freedom gave them, oft, when work was done and the night of life threw its waning shadows around them, their tears would fall for the scattered voices--they would mourn o'er their past oppression. Yet they hid their grief from an unsympathizing generation, and the memory of their oppressors awoke but to the call of fitful retrospection.

"Joel, does yo 'member what de scriptur' ses about de stranger widin dy gates?" asked Aunt Lindy, as she hurriedly made ready for the "victim of the great fire."

"Ole 'oman, I gits mo' forgetful each day I lib, but it 'pears to me dat it says su'thin 'bout 'Heal de sick an' lead the blind,'" the old man said, as he stood with a look of deep concern settling on his aged face; "yes, ole 'oman," brightening up, "yes, dat's hit, kase I 'member de words de bressed Marster say to dem lis'ning souls geddered 'roun him, 'If yo hab dun it to de least ob dese my brudderin, yo hab dun it onto me."

"Yas, yas, I 'members now," Aunt Lindy murmured, as she moved the bed that the stranger was to rest upon out in the middle of the small room, the headboard near the window almost covered with climbing honeysuckle, all in sweet bloom.

"It am won'erful," she continued, meditatively, "how de Marster 'ranges t'ings to suit His work and will. I'se kep dis bed fixed fur yeahs, 'maginein' dat somehow, in de prov'dence ob Gawd, one ob de chil'en mou't chance dis away wid no place to lay his hed--de law me! Joel, mak' hast' an' fetch in dat shuck bed, de sun hab made it as sweet as de flowers, 'fore de dew falls offen dem, an' reckolec I wants a hole passel of mullen leaves; dey's powerful good fur laying fever, an' as yo's gwine dat way you mou't jes as well get er han'ful ob mounting mint, sweet balsam--an' cam'ile," she called after him, "ef yo pass enny."

About candle-light Dr. Bronson arrived with his patient, while his two assistants placed him on the bed prepared for him; the doctor explained the critical condition of the sick man to the trusty old nurse, and directed as to the medicine. "Do not disturb him for an hour at least, Aunt Lindy; let him sleep, for he needs all the strength he can rally--he has but one slim chance out of ten."

"Pore sole, I'll look arter him same's ef he war my own chile."

"I know that, Aunt Lindy; I will stop in on my way back from the ridge in about a couple of hours."

"All rite, sah."

Uncle Joel, with the desired herbs, returned shortly afterward. "Is he cum yit, ole 'oman?"

"Shsh! sure nuff," she whispered, with a warning motion of her head toward the partitioned room where the sick man lay. Heeding the warning, Uncle Joel whispered back:

"If dar's nuffin I kin do jes now to he'p yo, I'll  
/ jes step ober to Brer An'erson's; I heah dere's  
/ a new brudder who's gwine to lead de meetin',  
/ as Brer Wilson is ailin'."

"Go 'long, Joel, dere's nuffin yo kin do jes  
/ now."

"Well den, s'long, ole 'oman," the old man  
/ said, as he stepped noiselessly out into the  
/ sweet perfume-laden air.

For a long time Aunt Lindy sat dozing by the  
/ smothered fire; so lightly, though that almost



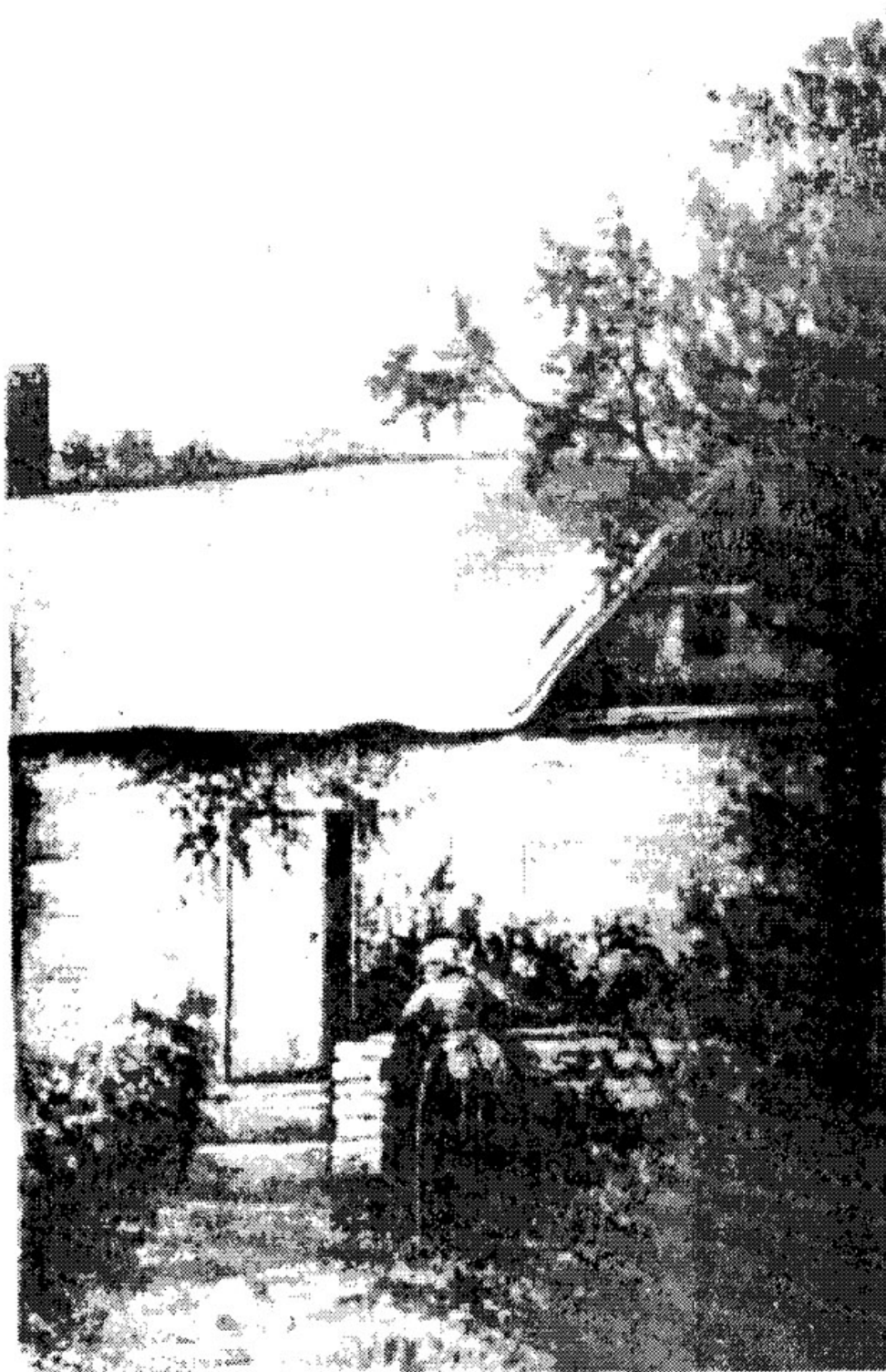
the rustling of the wind through the leaves  
/ would have awakened her.

The moonlight streamed in the doorway; now and then sounds issuing from the "pra'r meetin'," a few doors away, could be heard on the still evening air. After a while the nurse rose, lighted a candle, and went to make sure the sick man was comfortable. Entering softly, she stepped to the bedside and looked at the face of the sleeper; suddenly she grew dizzy, breathless, amazed, as though her eyes had deceived her; she placed the candle close by his face and peered wildly at this bruised, bandaged, silver-haired stranger in a fascinated sort of way, as though she were powerless to speak. At last:

"Great Gawd! it's Marse Jeems!"

The quick, vengeful flame leaped in her eyes, as her mind, made keen by years of secret suffering and toil, travelled through time and space; she saw wrongs which no tongue can enumerate; demoniac gleams of exultation and bitter hatred settled upon her now grim features; a pitiless smile wreathed her set lips, as she gazed with glaring eyeballs at this helpless, homeless "victim of the great fire," as though surrounded by demons; a dozen wicked impulses rushed through her mind--a life for a life--no mortal eye was near, an intercepted breath, a gasp, and--

"Lindy, Lindy, don't tell Miss Cynthia," the sick man weakly murmured: in the confused state of his brain it required but this familiar black face to conduct his disordered thoughts to the palmiest period of his existence. He again revelled in opulence, saw again the cotton fields--a waving tract of bursting snowballs--the magnolia, the oleander--



"Whar's my chil'en?" Nurse Lindy fairly shrieked in his face. "To de fo' win's ob de ear'fh, yo ole debbil, yo." He heard her not now, for white and unconscious he lay, while the long pent-up passion found vent. Her blood was afire, her tall form swayed, her long, bony hands trembled like an animal at bay; she stepped back as if to spring upon him, with clutching fingers extended; breathless she paused; the shouts of the worshippers broke upon the evening air--the olden-time melody seemed to pervade the cabin; she listened, turned, and fled--out through the open doorway,--out into the white moonlight, down the shadowed lane, as if impelled by unseen force. She unconsciously approached the prayer-meeting door. "Vengeance is mine, ses de Lawd," came from within; her anger died away; quickly her steps she retraced. "Mi'ty Gawd, stren'fin my arm, an pur'fy my heart," was all she said.

Soon from the portals of death she brought him, for untiringly she labored, unceasingly she prayed in her poor broken way; nor was it in

vain, for before the frost fell the crisis passed, the light of reason beamed upon the silver-haired stranger, and revealed in mystic characters the service rendered by a former slave-Aunt Lindy. He marvelled at the patient faithfulness of these people. He saw but the gold-did not dream of the dross burned away by the great Refiner's fire. From that time Aunt Lindy and Uncle Joel never knew a sorrow, secret or otherwise; for not only was the roof above their heads secured to them, but the new "brudder" who came to "lead de meetin' in Brer Wilson's place," was proved beyond a doubt, through the efforts of the silver-haired stranger, to be their first-born. The rest were "sleeping until the morning," and not to the "fo' win's ob de ear'fh," as was so greatly feared by Aunt Lindy.