

AUNT NANCY HART.

There lived in Georgia, during the Revolutionary struggle, the most remarkable woman in some respects that the country has produced. To find her match, we shall have to go to the fables that are told about the Amazons. The Liberty Boys called her Aunt Nancy Hart. The Indians, struck by her wonderful feats in behalf of her country, called her "The War Woman;" and there is a creek in Elbert County, where she lived, that was named by the Indians "War Woman's Creek."

There are other heroines to whom history has paid more attention, and whose deeds have been celebrated in song and story; but not one of them was more devoted to the high cause of freedom, or more courageous, or depended less on aid from others, than Aunt Nancy Hart. In this last respect, the War Woman of Georgia stands alone in history, just as she stood alone when the Tories were waging a war of extermination, sparing neither women nor children, in the region in which she lived. Invention and fable have kindly come to the aid of the most famous of the world's heroines, but neither fable nor invention has touched the character or the deeds of this heroine of the Revolution. She stands out on the pages of history rough, uncouth, hot-tempered, unmanageable, uneducated, impolite, ugly, and sharp-tongued; but, as her friends said of her, "What a honey of a patriot she was!" She loved the Liberty Boys as well as she loved her own children. It has been said that she was cruel; but this charge may as well be put out of sight. Before passing upon it, we should have to know what the War Woman's eyes had seen, and what terrible revelations her ears had heard. Standing for American independence in a region that swarmed with Tories, whose murderous deeds never have been and never will be fully set forth, Aunt Nancy Hart had to defend her own hearthstone and her own children.

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The maiden name of this remarkable woman was Morgan, and she was born in North Carolina. She married Benjamin Hart, a brother of Colonel Thomas Hart of Kentucky. Thomas Hart was the father of the wife of Henry Clay, and the uncle of the celebrated Thomas Hart Benton. Aunt Nancy and her husband moved to Georgia with the North Carolina emigrants, and settled on Broad River, in what is now Elbert County. She was nearly six feet high, and very muscular,—the result of hard work. She had red hair, and it is said that she was cross-eyed, but this has been denied on good authority. It matters little. Her eyes were keen enough to pierce through all Tory disguises, and that was enough for her. It is certain that her courage and her confidence kept alive the spark of liberty in hearts that would otherwise have smothered it, and was largely responsible for kindling it into the flame that finally swept the British out of that section, and subdued the Tories. When the Whigs and patriots who had been her neighbors were compelled to flee before the murderous Tories, she refused to go with them, but stood her ground and never ceased to speak her sentiments boldly. Nothing but the wholesome dread with which she had inspired them prevented the Tories from murdering her and her children. When General Elijah Clarke moved the women and children of the Broad River region to an asylum in Kentucky, and the Liberty Boys had taken refuge in South Carolina, Aunt Nancy Hart remained at home, and for a long and dismal period she was unprotected save by her own remarkable courage.

At that period the houses were built of logs, and the chimneys were built of sticks plastered with clay. They were called "stack chimneys." One evening Aunt Nancy and her children were sitting around the fire, on which a pot of soap was boiling. Now, a pot of soap must be constantly stirred, and for this

the strong, muscular arms of Aunt Nancy were peculiarly fitted. So she stirred the soap, and, as she stirred, told the youngsters the latest news of the war. Presently one of her children chanced to discover some one peeping through the crack of the chimney, eavesdropping. By a gesture or a nod of the head Aunt Nancy was informed of what was going on. She smiled, and grew more spirited in her talk, rattling away and laughing as she gave exaggerated accounts of the recent defeats of the Tories. As she talked, she stirred the bubbling soap, and kept her keen eyes on the crack where the eavesdropper had been seen. Suddenly she dashed a ladleful of boiling soap through the crack full into the face of the intruder. It was so quickly and deftly done, that the eavesdropper had no time to dodge the scalding stuff. He received the full benefit of it Blinded and half crazed by the pain, he howled and screamed at a tremendous rate. Aunt Nancy went out, and, after amusing herself at his expense, bound him fast and held him prisoner. The probability is that the next day she tucked up her petticoats, shouldered her gun, and compelled the unlucky Tory to ford the river ahead of her; and that, once on the other side, she kept in constant communication with the Clarkes and with other partisans of the American cause.

Her husband, whom she sometimes jokingly described as "a poor stick," assisted her in her communications. A conch shell was kept at the spring, some distance from the house. On this conch shell the children were taught to blow the blasts that gave Mr. Hart information. One signal was, "The enemy is at hand;" another was, "Keep close;" another, "Make tracks for the swamp;" and still another was that he and his friends were wanted at the cabin.

At the very darkest hour of the Revolution in Georgia, Aunt Nancy performed one of her most remarkable feats,—one that brought into play all the courage and devotion of her strong nature, and all the tact and audacity that belonged to her character.

Brigadier General Andrew Williamson, with three hundred men, was encamped near Augusta. When Charleston fell, this officer, who was already a traitor, though his treachery had not been avowed, called his officers together, and expressed the opinion that it would be foolish to further resist the King. He therefore advised them to return to their homes, and there accept the protection which would be offered them. He then abandoned his command, which was immediately disbanded. Shortly afterwards Colonels Brown and Garrison, two partisans of the King's army who had made themselves notorious by their cruelty to Americans, seized Augusta. Brown had been tarred and feathered in Augusta just before the breaking-out of the Revolution, and he made the patriots of that town and of the country roundabout pay dearly for the indignities that had been heaped upon him on account of his loyalty to the Crown. He confiscated the property of the patriots, and issued an order banishing all Whig families beyond the borders of Georgia.

Raiding parties were sent into the region in the neighborhood of Augusta to compel the inhabitants to take the oath of allegiance to the King. One of these parties entered the house of Colonel John Dooly, a gallant officer, and murdered him in cold blood in the presence of his wife and children. Colonel Dooly was the father of Judge Dooly, who became famous in Georgia after the war.

A detachment of this murdering party found its way to Aunt Nancy Hart's cabin. There were five Tories in the detachment, and Aunt Nancy received them coldly enough. They told her they had come to inquire into the truth of a report they had heard to the effect that she had aided a well-known rebel to escape from a company of King's men by whom he was pursued. With a twinkle of

malice in her eyes, Aunt Nancy boldly declared that she had aided her Liberty Boy to escape, and then she described the affair.

She said that one day she heard the gallop of a horse. Looking out, she saw a horseman approaching, and at once knew him to be a Whig flying from pursuers. She let down the bars near her cabin, told him to ride his horse right through her house, in at the front door and out at the back, to take to the swamp, and hide himself the best he could. She then put up the bars, entered her house, closed the doors, and went about her business. In a little while a party of Tories rode up, and called to her with some rudeness. She muffled her head and face in a shawl, opened the door slowly, and asked in a feeble voice who it was that wanted to pester a sick, lone woman. The Tories said they had been pursuing a man, and had traced him near her house. They wanted to know if any one had passed that way. "I told 'em," said Aunt Nancy to the listening Tories, "that I had seen a man on a sorrel horse turn out of the road into the woods a little ways back. So they went back and took to the woods, and my Whig boy got off safe and sound."

Naturally this story, boldly told, did not please the five Tories who heard it; but something in the War Woman's eye prevented them from offering her any personal injury. Instead, they ordered her to give them something to eat.

"I never feed King's men if I can help it," she replied. "The scamps have fixed me so that I can't feed my own family in a decent manner. They have run off with all my pigs and poultry except that old gobbler you see in the yard there."

"Well, you shall cook the old gobbler for us," exclaimed one who seemed to be the leader of the party. Suiting the action to the word, he raised his musket and shot the gobbler. One of his men brought it into the house and gave it to Aunt Nancy, with orders to clean and cook it at once. This, of course, made that stanch patriot very angry, and she gave the Tories a violent tongue lashing.

It is probable that while she was dressing the turkey for the pot, the Tories let some hint drop about the outrageous murder of Colonel John Dooly, who was a warm friend of Aunt Nancy's. At any rate, she suddenly changed her tactics. She ceased to storm and quarrel, the scowl left her face, and she soon seemed to be in high good humor. She went about getting the meal ready with great good will. She sent her little girl to the spring after water, but told her to sound on the conch shell the signal to "keep close," so that her husband and his neighbors who were with him might know there were Tories in the cabin.

While the daughter was gone after water, one of the Tories volunteered to take her place in helping to get everything ready. Aunt Nancy accepted his services, and joked with him with great freedom and familiarity. Like all women of spirit and independence, Aunt Nancy possessed a considerable fund of humor, and it stood her in good stead now. She contrived to thoroughly interest the Tories, and it was not long before they were in the most jovial frame of mind imaginable. They had expected to find a bad-tempered, ill-conditioned woman; and they were agreeably surprised when they found, instead, a woman who could match their rude jests, and make herself thoroughly entertaining.

The Tories had brought a jug with them, and they were so pleased with Aunt Nancy's seeming friendliness that they invited her to drink with them. "I'll take one swig with you," said Aunt Nancy,

"if it kills every cow on the Island," meaning a neck of land at the junction of river and creek where the Whig families of the neighborhood pastured their cattle and hid them. The Tories laughed and drank, and then they laughed and drank again. They kept this up until the old gobbler had been cooked to Aunt Nancy's satisfaction; and by the time they were ready to sit down to table they were in a very merry mood indeed.

They had stacked their arms within easy reach of where they had been sitting and drinking; but Aunt Nancy had moved her table to the middle of the floor, so as to be able to walk around it on all sides while waiting on the Tories. In helping the men to the turkey and other eatables that she had prepared, she frequently came between them and their muskets. The Tories had hardly begun to eat before they called for water. Aunt Nancy, expecting this, had used up in cooking all that had been brought: consequently her daughter had to take the piggin and go to the spring after a fresh supply. She went with instructions to signal her father, and the neighbors who were with him, to come immediately to the cabin. While her daughter was at the spring, Aunt Nancy managed to pull off one of the boards that filled the space between the logs of the house, and through this crack she slipped two of the muskets. She was slipping the third through when her movements caught the eye of one of the Tories. Instantly the men sprang to their feet, but Aunt Nancy was now in her element. Quick as a flash she clapped the musket to her shoulder, and threatened to shoot the first man that approached her. The men, knowing her reputation as a fighter, and awed by her appearance, hesitated. At last one bolder than the rest began to advance toward her. She fired promptly, and at the report of the gun the man fell dead on the floor.

Before the others could recover from their consternation, Aunt Nancy had seized another musket, and held it in readiness to fire again. Her daughter had now returned from the spring with the information that her father and his neighbors would soon arrive. Directed by her mother, the girl took the remaining musket and carried it out of the house. The Tories, seeing that no time was to be lost in recovering their arms, proposed to rush upon Aunt Nancy in a body and overpower her. But the War Woman was equal to the occasion. She fired again, and brought down another Tory. As she did so, the daughter, acting on her orders, handed her another musket. Then, taking position in the doorway, she called on the men to "surrender their ugly Tory carcasses to a Whig woman."

The Tories agreed to surrender, and wanted to shake hands to make the bargain binding; but Aunt Nancy kept her position in the doorway until her husband and his friends made their appearance. The Whigs wanted to shoot the Tories; but Aunt Nancy, whose blood was up, declared that shooting was too good for them. "They've murdered John Dooly," she exclaimed; "now let them hang for it!" Thereupon the Tories were taken out and hanged. The tree from which they swung was still standing as late as 1838, and was often pointed out by old people who had lived through the troubled times of the Revolution.

One day Aunt Nancy met a Tory going along the highway. She engaged him in conversation, diverted his attention, and suddenly seized his gun and wrenched it away from him. She then ordered him to take up the line of march for a fort not far distant. Not daring to disobey, the man marched before her, as many others had been compelled to do, and she turned him over to the commander of the fort.

When Augusta was in the hands of the British, and their raiding parties had been driven in by the Americans under Colonel Elijah Clarke, it became necessary for that commander to get some positive

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information in regard to the intentions of the British. At this juncture Aunt Nancy came to the rescue. She disguised herself as a man, and went boldly into the British camp. She remained there for several days, pretending to be crazy. In this way she secured a great deal of important information, and made haste to carry it to Colonel Clarke.

Aunt Nancy was once left in a fort with several other women and a number of small children, her own among the rest. The men had gone out in search of supplies. They had not expected an attack, and had left only one of their number, a young man, to protect the women and children. Suddenly a party of Tories and Indians made its appearance, and surrounded the fort, which was nothing more than a stockade. The yelling of the savages threw all the women and children into the utmost confusion,—all except Aunt Nancy. That wonderful woman, who never knew what fear was, only became more energetic in the face of danger. There was a small cannon in the fort, but it was not in position to reach the enemy with its fire. After trying her best to lift the cannon into position, Aunt Nancy remembered the young man who had been left in the fort, and looked about for him; but he was not to be seen. A close search discovered him hiding under a cowhide. Aunt Nancy pulled him out by the heels, and vowed she would make mince-meat of him unless he helped her to move the cannon. The fellow knew perfectly well that Aunt Nancy was not to be trifled with when her blood was up. He gave her the necessary assistance. She aimed the cannon and fired it, and the Tories and savages promptly took to their heels.

On another occasion when the river was high, it became necessary for the Americans on the Georgia side to know what was going on on the Carolina side; but no one could be induced to venture across. Hearing of the difficulty, Aunt Nancy promptly undertook to go.

eph The freshet had swept away all the boats, but to Aunt Nancy this was a trifling matter. She found a few logs, tied them together with grapevines, and on this raft made the voyage across the river. She gathered the necessary information, and made haste to communicate it to the Georgia troops.

eph Aunt Nancy was the mother of eight children,—six sons and two daughters. Her eldest daughter, Sally, married a man named Thompson, who was as quicktempered as his mother-in-law. After the war, Aunt Nancy moved to Brunswick. Sally and her husband followed a year or two later. In passing through Burke County, they camped for the night by the roadside. The next morning Thompson ordered a white man, who had been hired as a teamster, to perform some duty. Thompson's tone was so peremptory that the man returned an insolent answer, and refused. In a fit of rage, Thompson drew his sword, and severed the man's head from his body with one swinging stroke. He then drove the team himself until he came to the first house, where he gave information that he had cut off a fellow's head at the camp down the road, and that they "had best go and bury him." He then drove on, but was overtaken, arrested, and lodged in jail at Waynesboro. As soon as Aunt Nancy heard of the trouble, she made her appearance in the upcountry again. Within a few days after her return, the jail was found open one morning, and Thompson was gone. Speaking of this afterwards, Aunt Nancy was heard to exclaim,—

"Drat 'em! that's the way with 'em all. When they get into trouble, they always send for me!"

Not long after this episode, Mr. Benjamin Hart died. Aunt Nancy mourned his loss for a while, and then married a young man. Then, as the saying is, she "pulled up stakes," and moved to what is now

the State of Alabama, on the Tombigbee. There she had the French and the Spaniards for neighbors, and she felt at home with neither race. She was bluntly, emphatically, and unaffectedly American. To add to her troubles, a big rain flooded the river, destroyed her crops, and surrounded her house. This, with the French and Spaniards, was too much for her. She returned to Georgia, but, finding her old home occupied by others, she settled in Edgefield, S.C.

A Methodist society was formed in her neighborhood, and its influence became so active that Aunt Nancy's conscience began to trouble her. She listened to the preaching of the Word from a distance until she became worried about her future state. She went to the meetinghouse, but found the door closed against intruders. The deacon and members were holding a class meeting. The closed door was no obstacle to Aunt Nancy. She cut the fastening and walked in without ceremony. Once in, she found what she wanted. She became an enthusiastic Methodist, and is said to have fought Satan and sin as manfully as she fought the Tories and the British.

When Governor George R. Gilmer of Georgia was in Congress, in 1828-29, the members were very anxious to attract the notice of General Jackson, who had been elected President. A proposal was made to fill the vacant niches in the rotunda with paintings descriptive of the battle of New Orleans and the general's other victories. Governor Gilmer offered as an amendment a resolution to fill one of the niches with a painting of Aunt Nancy Hart wading Broad River, her petticoats held up with one hand, a musket in the other, and driving three Tories before her, to deliver them up to Colonel Elijah Clarke.

Governor Gilmer's proposition was a more sensible one than he intended it to be. Georgia has perpetuated Aunt Nancy's name by calling a county after her; but the Republic owes something to her memory.