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The Story of *The Star-Spangled Banner*

Cast:

Major George Armistead, Mary Pickersgill, Caroline Pickersgill, Dr. William Beanes, John Skinner, Francis Scott Key, British Admiral, 2 British Sailors, Narrators

Narrator 1: The year was 1812, and America and England were at war again! The Americans fought to capture British forts in the north and west. The British responded by attacking American ports and creating blockades of ships so that people and goods could not get in or out.

Narrator 2: In Baltimore, Major George Armistead was in charge of the American fort - Fort McHenry. Fort McHenry was shaped like a star, with large cannons at each point. It guarded the city of Baltimore and the surrounding countryside.

Narrator 3: Major Armistead wanted the British to know that Fort McHenry belonged to the Americans, so he hired Mrs. Mary Pickersgill, a local seamstress, to sew a gigantic American flag to fly over the fort.

Major Armistead: Mrs. Pickersgill, I know that you have made flags for many ships, but now I want you to make a flag bigger than any you have ever sewn. I want it to be 30 feet high and 42 feet wide. I will fly it over the Fort for all to see.

Mary Pickersgill: Sir, I would be honored to make this flag for you, but such a big flag will require more room than I have in my tiny shop. I will see if there is a larger space in which to work. If I can find a place, I will sew the flag.

Narrator 4: Mrs. Pickersgill asked and got permission to use the floor of a large warehouse in Baltimore to spread out her flag. She had to work at night, when all the workers had gone home, so she and her daughter Caroline sewed by the light of oil lamps.

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Caroline: Mother, these stars are so big! They are nearly two feet across. They will certainly be seen from the harbor if the British come here.

Mary: Sew them on well, Caroline. This flag must be very sturdy and strong. See, I have sewn the binding twice, so that it will not come off of the flagpole. Fifteen stars and fifteen stripes will wave over Fort McHenry soon.

Narrator 5: When the flag was finished, Major Armistead proudly raised it over Fort McHenry. All through the winter and spring the flag waved in the stiff breeze. Finally, in the summer of 1814, the British ships arrived in the harbor, and the Major knew that Baltimore was now part of the war.

Narrator 6: During the summer there were many smaller battles between the Americans and the British. Both sides captured prisoners. Some of the British soldiers had their wounds treated by Dr. William Beanes. But Dr. Beanes himself was captured in a British raid and taken as a prisoner to the largest warship in the harbor.

Narrator 7: Major Armistead asked two men to go to the British Admiral and talk to him about releasing Dr. Beanes. It was a dangerous mission, so he chose two brave men. Mr. John Skinner was in charge of prisoner exchanges with the British, and Mr. Francis Scott Key was a lawyer in Baltimore. Both men agreed to go.

Narrator 8: Before they left, Francis Scott Key took time to visit the British prisoners being held in the fort. He had them sign letters saying that Dr. Beanes had been kind to them and treated their wounds. He put the letters in his pocket and took them to show the British why they should release Dr. Beanes.

Narrator 9: Early on the morning of September 12, John Skinner and Francis Scott Key got into a boat and began to row out toward the British ship. They held a white flag to let the ship know not to shoot at them. They had come to talk, not to fight. When they reached the ship, they were given permission to come aboard and talk to the Admiral.

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John Skinner: Sir, we are here to talk to you about the release of our friend, Dr. William Beanes, who is being held as a prisoner on your ship. If you will agree to let Dr. Beanes go free, we will let some of your men go free, too.

Admiral: I am sorry, but I cannot consider freeing Dr. Beanes.

Francis Scott Key: Sir, before you make your decision, please take the time to read these letters from your own men. They will tell you themselves that Dr. Beanes has helped them and treated their wounds. Many of your men are still alive because of him.

Admiral: Wait on the deck until I have had time to read these letters and consider your request.

Narrator 10: Mr. Skinner and Mr. Keys made their way to the deck of the ship. From here, the Fort looked far away, but they could see the large American flag, still waving above the walls. While they were waiting, two sailors standing nearby began to talk to each other.

British sailor 1: Well, it won't be long now until the battle begins. By this time tomorrow, Fort McHenry will belong to us.

British sailor 2: Their Fort will never be able to survive the blasts of our cannons. We are sure to win.

Narrator 11: Mr. Skinner and Mr. Keys were shocked to know that an attack would take place that very night. They must get back to the Fort and warn their friends! But they could not leave until the Admiral had made his decision about releasing Dr. Beanes. Soon, the Admiral called for them.

Admiral: Gentlemen, I have read the letters you brought, and I will agree to release Dr. Beanes. However, I cannot allow you to leave the ship. I believe that you may have heard our plans, and I cannot let you warn the Fort of our attack. You must stay here on this ship until the battle is over. Then I will release you all.

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Narrator 12: John Skinner, Francis Scott Key, and Dr. Beanes stood on the deck of the ship. There was no way for them send a warning, and they knew that Fort McHenry did not have enough soldiers to hold out for very long. As the sun set that evening, they looked across the water to see the Stars and Stripes flying bravely over the Fort.

Francis: I wonder if we will see that flag tomorrow, or if a British flag will fly in its place.

John: We will know soon enough.

Narrator 13: Early the next morning, while it was still dark, the British cannons began firing. All around Fort McHenry there were explosions. As the bombs lit up the night sky, the men peered through the smoke to see if they could spot the American flag. At first they were able to see it, but soon the air became so filled with smoke that they could hardly see at all. All through the day the battle raged, and on into the night.

Narrator 14: Finally, after 25 hours of battle, the cannons stopped. The battle smoke began to clear, and the sky began to lighten. The tired Americans rushed to the deck of the British ship and strained to see the Fort.

Dr. Beanes: What can you see?

John: Nothing, yet. There is not enough light. The sun is coming up now, and soon we will know how we have fared.

Francis: I believe I can see something. I can see a flag. Yes, it is the American Flag. Fort McHenry has been defended! The Americans have won! Quickly, I must have paper and pen. I must write about what has happened, and what we have seen.

Narrator 15: So there, on the deck of a British warship, on the morning of September 14, 1814, Francis Scott Key began to write the famous words for which he is still remembered.

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Francis Scott Key:

O say can you see by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming;
Whose broad stripes and bright stars, through the perilous fight,
O'er the ramparts we watched, were so gallantly streaming?

And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.
O say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

