A Conscript's Christmas.

BY JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS.

From The Century:

There was a pause here, during which Aunt Crirsy remarked, in a helpless sort of way:

"I woder whar Polly is, an' what she's a-doin'."

"Don't pester 'long of Polly," snapped the paralytic. "She know's what she's a doin'."

"About this Wesley Lovejoy," said Captain Moseley, turning to the old man; "you seem to know him very well."

"You here that, William!" exclaimed Colonel Watson. "He asts me ef I know Wes. Lovejoy! Do I know him? Why, the trifflin' houn'! I've knowed him ev'ry since he was big enough to rob a hen-roos'."

Uncle Billy Powers, in his genial way, tried to change the current of conversation, and he finally succeeded, but it was evident that Adjutant Lovejoy had one enemy, if not several, in that humble household. Such was the feeling for Spurlock and contempt for Lovejoy that Captain Moseley and Private Chadwick felt themselves to be interlopers, and they once more suggested the necessity of pursuing their journey. This saggestion seemed to amuse the paralytic, who laughed loudly.

"Lord A'mighty!" he exclaimed. "I know how you feel, an' I don't blame you for feelin' so; but don't you go up the mountain this night. Thes stay right whar you is, bec'se ef you don't you'll make all your friends feel bad for you. Don't ast me how, don't ast me why. Thes you stay. Come an' put me to bed. William, an' don't let these folks go out'n the house this night."

Uncle Billy carried the old man into the next room, tucked him away in his bed, and then came back. Conversation lagged to such an extent that Aunt Crissy once more felt moved to inquire about Polly. Uncle Billy responded with a sweeping gesture of his right hand, which might mean much or little. To the two Confederates it meant nothing, but to Aunt Crissy it said that Polly had gone up the mountain in the rain and cold. Involuntarily the woman shuddered and drew nearer the fire.

It was in fact a venturesome journey that Polly had undertaken. Hardened as she was to the weather, familiar as she was to the footpaths that led up and down and around the face of the mountain, her heart rose in her mouth when she found herself fairly on the road to Spurlock's house. The darkness was almost overwhelming in its intensity. As Uncle Billy powers remarked, while showing the two Confederates to their bed in the "shed-room" there "was a solid chunk of it from one end of creation to t' other." The rain, falling steadily but not heavily, was bitterly cold, and it was made more uncomfortable by the wind, which rose and fell with a muffled roar, like the sigh of some Titanic spirit flying hither and yonder in the wild recesses of the sky. Bold as she was, the girl was appaled by the invisible contention that seemed to be going on in the elements above her, and more than once she paused, ready to flee, as best she could, back to the light and warmth she had left behind; but the gesture of Chadwick, with its cruel significance, would recur to her, and then, clenching her teeth, she would press blindly on. She was carrying a message of life and freedom to Israel Spurlock.

With the rain dripping from her hair and skirts, her face and hands benumbed with cold, but with every nerve strung to the highest tension and every faculty alert to meet whatever danger might present itself, Polly struggled on up the mountain path, feeling her way as best she could, and pulling herself along by the aid of the friendly saplings and the overhanging trees.

After a while—and it seemed a long time to Polly, contending with the fierce forces of the night and beset by a thousand doubts and fears—she could hear Spurlock's dogs barking. What if the two soldiers, suspecting her mission, had mounted their horses and outstripped her? She had no time to remember the difficulties of the mountain road, nor did she know that she had been on her journey not more than half an hour.

[To be Continued.]

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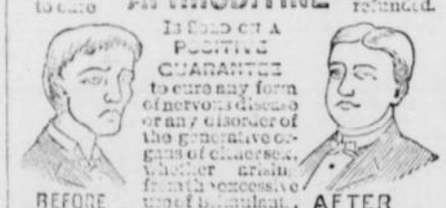

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