

A Conscript's Christmas.

BY JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS.

From The Century:

He went noiselessly about the room, picking up first one thing and then another. Over one shoulder he flung a canteen and over the other a hunting horn. Into his coat pocket he thrust an old-fashioned powder flask. Meanwhile his mother was busy gathering together such articles as Israel might need. His rifle she placed by the door, and then filled a large homespun satchel with a supply of victuals—a baked fowl, a piece of smoked beef, and a big piece of light bread. These preparations were swiftly and silently made. When everything seemed to be ready for his departure Israel presented the appearance of a peddler. "I'm goin' up to the Rock," he said, by way of explanation, "an' light the fire. Maybe the boys 'll see it, an' maybe they wont. Leastways they're mighty apt to smell the smoke."

Then, without further farewell, he closed the door and stepped out into the darkness, leaving the two women sitting by the hearth. They sat there for hours, gazing into the fire and scarcely speaking to each other. The curious reticence that seems to be developed and assiduously cultivated by the dwellers on the mountains took possession of them. The confidences and the sympathies they had in common were those of observation and experience, rather than the result of an interchange of views and opinions.

Towards morning the drizzling rain ceased, and the wind, changing its direction, sent the clouds flying to the east, whence they had come. About dawn, Private Chadwick, who had slept most soundly, was aroused by the barking of the dogs, and got up to look after the horses. As he slipped quietly out of the house he saw a muffled figure crossing the yard.

"Halt!" he cried, giving the challenge of a sentinel. "Who goes there?"

"Nobody ner nothin' that 'll bite you, I reckon," was the somewhat snappish response. It was the voice of Polly. She was looking up and across the mountains to where a bright red glare was reflected on the scurrying clouds. The density of the atmosphere was such that the movements of the flames were photographed on the clouds, rising and falling, flaring and fading, as though the dread spirits of the storm were waving their terrible red banners from the mountain.

"What can that be?" asked Chadwick, after he had watched the singular spectacle a moment.

Polly laughed aloud, almost joyously. She knew it was Israel's beacon. She knew that the red reflections, waving over the farther spur of the mountain and over the valley that nestled so peacefully below, would summon half a hundred men and boys—the entire congregation of Antioch Church, where her father was in the habit of holding forth on the first Sunday of each month. She knew that Israel was safe, and the knowledge restored her good humor.

"What did you say it was?" Chadwick inquired again, his curiosity insisting on an explanation. "It's just a fire, I reckon," Polly calmly replied. "Ef it's a house

burnin' down, it can't be helped. Water couldn't save it now."

Whereupon she pulled the shawl from over her head, tripped into the house, and went about preparing breakfast, singing merrily. Chadwick watched her as she passed and repassed from the rickety kitchen to the house, and when the light grew clearer he thought he saw her face a look that he did not understand. It was indeed an inscrupulous expression, and it would have puzzled a wiser man than Chadwick. He chopped some wood, brought some water, and made himself generally useful; but he received no thanks from Polly.

She ignored him as completely as if he had never existed, and all this set the private to thinking. Now a man who reflects much usually thinks out a theory to fit every thing he does not understand. Chadwick thought out his theory while the girl was preparing breakfast.

(To be Continued.)

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