

# A Southern Christmas

Before the Emancipation Proclamation

By ELLA RAY WELCH

It was Dec. 15. That was before railroads had taken from the Mississippi river the great carrying trade of freight and passengers, and the steamers plying back and forth between St. Louis or Cincinnati and New Orleans were the main means of conveyance in the southwest. One might start from either of these cities early in December, when the ground was covered with snow, and reach New Orleans for Christmas to find summer still lingering.

On this day of Dec. 15, when the steamer Tecumseh was passing Baton Rouge, in the cabin sat two men playing cards. In those days on the Mississippi gambling went on openly, either chips or money on the table without any pretense of concealment, and these two men were playing with the principal currency of the period—the state bank bills. One of them was a professional gambler, the other a young sugar planter, whose home was in Louisiana, not far from New Orleans. The gambler was quietly taking away from the planter what money he had with him; now permitting him to win a few dollars, and now forcing him to lose a great many. Presently he took the last of his opponent's funds.

Arthur St. Clair could not afford to lose this money. He owned a good plantation and the negroes to work it, but had no capital. Indeed, many of the planters of that day were in a continual state of debt, usually borrowing on a new crop before having liquidated their indebtedness for the old one. St. Clair was one of these. Besides working on the credit system in vogue at the time, he was a very kind master to his slaves and never denied them anything they wanted, no matter what the cost. Nevertheless, having lost some \$800 to the gambler, he yielded to a temptation to risk separating one of the families he owned, for the purpose of making an attempt to recoup. "I have a negro boy, ten years old," he said, "whom I consider worth at least \$400. Will you lend me \$200 on him?"

"Certainly, suh; with pleasure, suh." "I'll draw up a note containing a lien on the boy."

"It's not necessary, I assure you, suh. Your word is quite enough, suh."

So they played on till the amount loaned was lost; then \$200 more was borrowed. This also being lost, a bill of sale for the boy was made out for the property to be delivered ten days from the date, signed by St. Clair and handed to the gambler.

"I would be happy to loan you more on other of your servants, suh," said the gambler.

"No," said the other ruefully. "By what I have done I have separated a family. The boy I have lost at cards is the only child of the best man and the best woman I have on my plantation. It will break both the father's and the mother's hearts to part with him. I have done very wrong and will do no more."

St. Clair, with lowering brow, went out on the guard, as the deck outside the cabin was called, and, sitting himself down in one of the wooden arm-chairs he found there, gave himself up to remorse at having yielded to temptation. He was not troubled at the money he had lost, for money in itself was of little value in his eyes. But he had used his credit to the uttermost farthing, and he saw no way to prevent the boy he had lost, Billy, from being torn from his parents. In ten days a scene would be enacted that he dreaded. Ten days! Why, in ten days it would be Christmas.

St. Clair arose from his chair and paced the guard feverishly. Of all the days in the year to take a boy from his parents and turn him over to strangers! Why had he not made the time twenty days—any other than on Christmas day? It had not occurred to him that the tenth day from the present would be the day on which all Christians tried to make all other Christians happy. How could he tell his man, Sam, that on Christmas day instead of being made happy by gifts his family was to be made miserable by the loss of one of its number?

St. Clair carried his trouble home with him, but kept it to himself till the day before Christmas. He tried to nerve himself to tell his wife, that she might relieve him of the task of telling Sam and Susan, the parents of little Billy, that on Christmas day they must part with their best beloved. But his effort was a failure. Adelia St. Clair took as much interest in the welfare of her negroes as if they were a part of her own family. Her husband could not nerve himself to confess how weak he had been.

He knew that Sam was very fond of him, though he was Sam's master. He had often stood between Sam and harm and had given him everything he wanted. He felt that he could impart the news to Sam with less pain to himself than to any one else and knew that by confessing the whole story Sam would blame him less than any one else. So the day before Christmas, calling the slave aside where he would not be overheard by others, he made his confession.

"Sam," he added, when he had told that on Christmas the new owner of Billy would arrive to take the boy away, "this breaks my heart."

"Mars Arthur," gasped Sam, "I forgive you, but I wouldn't forgive no udder marster in de worl'."

Adelia St. Clair learned the secret that her husband could not force himself to tell her from the boy's mother, who, frantic with grief, went to her to entreat her to do something to save her from being separated from her boy. The blow was almost as severe upon the mistress as upon the slave. But she kept her head and sent Susan away assuring her that if there was anything she could do to prevent the calamity she would do it, but, knowing her husband's financial straits, she could give no hope.

As soon as Sue had departed Mrs. St. Clair sent for her husband. The custom of gambling was so prevalent among the planters of that day that she did not reproach him. She could not but recognize that he had been weak to risk the happiness of a family whom both he and she considered committed to their charge by Providence, but she knew nothing was to be gained by holding up to him his sin, and she knew he suffered keenly for what he had done. She began at once to confer with him upon some plan by which a sum might be raised to buy back the boy. In vain they went over everything they possessed that could possibly be mortgaged. All such prop-

erty had been mortgaged already. Besides, there was no time to negotiate. New Orleans was the nearest place where such a matter could be attended to, and to go there, make a loan and return would require several days.

Sam came in just as they had agreed that nothing could be done to save his boy to him. He looked anxiously from one to the other to see if there was any hope. St. Clair nodded to his wife to speak for both.

"There is no time in which to prevent the separation," she said. "Your master has received a message that Billy will be called for tomorrow. We can only promise that if we can keep a knowledge of Billy's future whereabouts we will buy him back if it should be possible."

There was no comfort in this for Sam. He knew his master's proneness to drift financially and believed that he would get deeper and deeper in debt. With a moan he turned away to impart the sad tidings to his wife.

The news that little Billy had been sold and was to be taken away on Christmas morning cast a gloom over all, white and black, on the plantation. "Dis won't be no Chris'mas at all," said one.

"Wha' mars go sell Billy fo' to go way on Chris'mas? He ought to had mo' sense than dat," said another.

"Yo' shet up, nigga," said a third. "Mars wouldn't 'a' done dat if he hadn't had to done it."

These criticisms, though plentiful among the negroes, were not mingled with much blame. They all knew their master and had perfect confidence in his intentions.

As soon as St. Clair had finished his breakfast—a cup of coffee—he left the plantation in order to avoid being present at Billy's departure. About 10 o'clock a house servant announced to Mrs. St. Clair that a man had come for Billy. Mrs. St. Clair went to a jewel box, where she found the remains of her jewels that had not been pledged. Taking a mental inventory of them, she could not possibly make out their total worth at over \$300. She sighed at not being able to find anything more.

Taking the remnant of a property that had been in her family for many generations, she went downstairs. She was surprised to find a well dressed man, not at all like one who might have been sent for a negro boy. He rose deferentially as she entered.

"I am surprised," she said, "at seeing a gentleman. Are you the owner of the boy you have come for?"

"Yes, madam." "May I ask who you are?" she added curiously.

"A gambler, madam." "A gambler?"

"Yes, madam. I am the gentleman who won the boy from your husband."

This looked hopeful. Mrs. St. Clair produced her jewels and was beginning a speech as to their value when the man interrupted her.

"Is your husband at home, madam?" "No. I expect he went away to get rid of seeing this poor family lose their treasure."

"I did not notice, madam, when I took a bill of sale from your husband that the property was to be delivered on Christmas day. I have come myself to see Mr. St. Clair to impress upon him the folly of playing cards for money with a professional gambler. I found him an easy prey." Taking out a wallet, he handed the lady a roll of bills and paper, then added, "There is the amount, madam. I won from your husband, and there is the bill of sale for the boy." The latter he tore into bits and threw them into a fire burning on the hearth. "I thought Christmas would be a proper day, madam, to give this advice to your husband. I found him a very attractive gentleman and am glad to have had an opportunity to show my appreciation of him. I bid you good morning, madam."

But Mrs. St. Clair would not let him go. She sent negroes to scour the country for her husband, and when he was found and brought in Sam and Sue and Billy were also sent for. The latter were not told of what had happened and came, supposing that they had been called for the parting.

That Christmas which opened so gloomily turned out to be the merriest that had ever been known on the St. Clair plantation.

A man may be rough looking and yet have a touch of sentiment about him.

A ragged, ill kept looking man appeared at the door of a woman's home and in a pleading tone asked:

"Have you a piece of cake, lady, to give to a poor man who hasn't had a bite for two days?"

"Cake?" echoed the woman in surprise. "Isn't bread good enough for you?"

"Ordinarily, yes, ma'am. But this is my birthday," explained the tramp.—New York Journal.

**Sometimes Pays.**  
A New York contractor said, apropos of a poor man who, after taking tremendous risks, had improved his position a little:

"This fellow's case proves to us that it is sometimes better to try the fire than to stay always in the frying pan."—Exchange.

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