

A BOLD DESERTER.

By JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS.

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SYNOPSIS.

At the beginning of the civil war there resided in Hillsborough, Ga., a poor widow, known for miles around as Aunt Sally. Her son, little Billy, was a boy, body called Billy Cochran, was a great favorite, especially with Major Goosby, the plump, portly, dear wife, who had been tenderly named by Aunt Sally. When therefore, the boy was taken as a recruit to the confederate army, the major threatened and defied the conscript officer; but it was of no avail, and little Billy was forced to go.

II.

Of course, everybody sympathized with Aunt Sally, and their sympathy added to her grief, for she was tenderly attached to her son. Moreover, she found herself the object of so much condolence, she naturally concluded that her trouble was a great deal worse than she had any idea of, and she sat in her humble home and wept, and like Rachel refused to be comforted.

But the situation was not nearly so bad as Aunt Sally thought it was, or as Major Goosby expected it would be. The major himself sent her a little negro girl to keep her company and the neighbors for miles around contended with one another in their efforts to make her comfortable. Not a day passed except Sundays, that Miss Mary, the young girl, did not call at Aunt Sally's little place and spend an hour or two with her. Miss Mary was eighteen, as pretty as a peach, and as full of fun as an egg is of meat. She was a brunnette with blue eyes, and although they were laughing eyes, they could be very sad and tender when occasion called for it.

She made herself very useful to Aunt Sally. She read her the letters that little Billy sent back from the camp to instruction at Loudersville, and an-



Miss Mary Writes a Note to Little Billy.

swered them at Aunt Sally's dictation. In this way she came to feel that she knew little Billy better than anyone else except his mother. She was surprised to find that, although little Billy had had few advantages in the way of schooling, he was a most beautiful lad. She took the fact home to her innocent bosom and wondered how it could be that this country lad had the knack of putting himself into his letters along with so many other things that were interesting. She was touched too, by the love for his mother that shone through every line of his handwriting. Once again, he called her his dear mamma and tried to comfort her; and sometimes he spoke of Miss Mary, and he was so deaf in expressing his gratitude to her that the young lady blushed and trembled lest some one else was writ-

ing.

When little Billy arrived at the camp of instruction, the first person on whom his eye fell was Private Chadwick. Simultaneously the eye of Private Chadwick fell on little Billy. Mr. Chadwick was something of a humorist in his way, and a rough one, but the way he used to find out on the other side, over again, he called her his dear mamma and tried to comfort her; and sometimes he spoke of Miss Mary, and he was so deaf in expressing his gratitude to her that the young lady blushed and trembled lest some one else was writ-

"Close about Hillsborough," little Billy answered. "I reckon you know the Tripps and the Littles?"
"Mighty well," said little Billy.
"What name?"
"Cochran."
"How old?"
"I'm 16 last April gone."

"You don't look like you're fifteen to do much soldierin'," suggested Private Chadwick.

"Oh, I'm tough," said little Billy, laughing, though he had a big lump in his throat.

"Come with me, Buddy," remarked the old fellow smiling. "If I'm ever to keep a tavern, I reckon I might as well begin with you as a boarder."

And so, for the first time at least, little Billy was installed in Private Chadwick's tent, much to the surprise of those who knew the peculiarities of the man. The camp was in charge of Captain Moseley, who was a towering giant, and he had selected his old comrade, Private Chadwick, as a curious selection—it seemed to be to those who didn't know the man, but the truth was that Private Chadwick knew as much about tactics as any West Pointer, and had the knack of imparting what he knew to others in such a simple belt strap to emphasize his remarks.

The next day the weather came on, little Billy wrote that he would feel a great deal more comfortable in the wind if he knew where he could get a thick suit of clothes and a heavy pair of shoes. But he begged his dear mamma not to worry about that, for he had no doubt the clothes and shoes would be forthcoming, and he had no fear of being a hero, who had no thought for anybody or anything except his dear old mamma.

The upshot of the matter was that little Billy went to Private Chadwick's tent and remained there. He and the private became inseparable companions when neither was on duty, and in these hours of leisure little Billy learned as much about tactics as a driller, the practical and the drilling. He seemed to take to the business naturally, and far outstripped the men who had been drilling twice a day for three months. Naturally, therefore, Private Chadwick was very proud of his pupil, and frequently called Captain Moseley's attention to little Billy's proficiency.

Often and often during the pleasant days of November, Private Chadwick could be seen sitting in front of their tent engaged in earnest conversation, little Billy leaning his face on his hands, and Private Chadwick making fantastic figures in the sand with the point of his bayonet. On such occasions little Billy would be talking about his dear mamma, and Miss Mary, and Miss Mary, although Private Chadwick was something of a joker, in his way, he never could say anything to laugh at in little Billy's devotion to his mother or in his innocent regard for Miss Mary Goosby. Somehow it carried the private back to his own boyhood days, and he listened to the lad with a sympathy that was as touching as it was delicate.

About the middle of December little Billy's box came. He carried it to Private Chadwick's tent in great glee, and opened it at once.

He had said to himself as he went along that he was sure there was something nice in the box, and he hoped to find Mr. Chadwick either in the tent or close by. The drummer was engaged just then in making a relay to the guard mark time in the guard tent by fiddling a bayonet at his toes.

For the moment, little Billy had his precious box all to himself. He opened it and found the letter that Miss Mary had pinned to the clothes. It ran thus:

Mr. Cochran:—Aunt Sally is very ill now, and has been ill for some time. We are all anxious for her recovery, and there is no person in the world that can cure her. She is losing your name and talking about you all the time. It would do her so much good to see you that I hope you can make it convenient for you to come home, soon, if only for a day. We should all be so glad to see you. Your true friend, Mary Goosby.

Holding this letter in his hand, little Billy sank down on a camp-stool and sat there, his forehead against the box. He sat as still as a statue, and was sitting thus when Private Chadwick came into the tent a half hour later. Little Billy neither turned his head nor moved when the drillmaster came in, snorting with rage and consigning all awkward recruits to places

too warm to be mentioned in polite conversation. But he pulled himself up when he saw little Billy sitting on the camp-stool staring at vacancy.

"Hello!" he cried. "What kind of picnic is this? If my nose ain't gone and forgot her manners, I smell cake."

He paused and looked at little Billy.

"Close about Hillsborough," little Billy said.

"I reckon you know the Tripps and the Littles?"

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"Hello! What Kind of a Picnic Is This?"

Seeing that the lad was troubled about something, he lowered his voice.

"What's the matter, old man? If it's trouble, it'll do you more good to talk about it than to think about it."

For answer little Billy held out the letter. Private Chadwick took it and began to read it. Then he held it close to his eyes.

"Now this is right down funny," he said, "and it's just like a gal. She's gone and scratched out the best part."

Little Billy neither moved nor spoke, but turned inquiring eyes on his patron and friend.

"She began it," Private Chadwick continued.

"Made a Well Ma of Me."

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