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—OF—
WARM SUNSHINE
SOFT SOUTHERN BREEZES
—AND—
Shredded Whole Wheat
IS HEALTH.

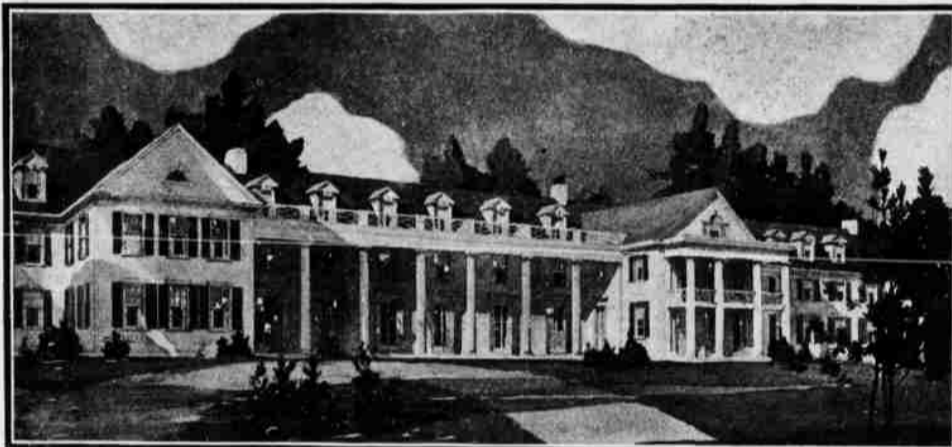
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THE DESERTER'S CHRISTMAS

A Strange Story of the Old South
by Col. Fred A. Olds



WE ARE now getting far enough away from the civil war to secure a perspective view; to see its many sides; to imagine at least its myriad sorrows; that pitiful war, literally between brothers, and the cause

of which will perhaps forever be in dispute, since while one part of the people say slavery was at the bottom of it all, others bitterly deny this and declare much higher purposes were at stake. Sorrowful as was the war to those who participated in it most actively, at the front, and to those who endured so much and wrought so much, at home, yet it was worse still for others than it was for these doers, for throughout the South, here and there, in small numbers, there lurked men whose one object in life was to keep out of service. These men were deserters and in no war ever waged in all this world of ours has that name been applied with more of contumely than to the men who shirked a sworn duty and who became at once traitors to any cause; outcasts, really rebels and in many cases thieves, and who became the veriest of wild beasts, hiding by day and prowling at night, a terror to any community near their hiding places.

And this is to be a story, if you please, about the Deserters' Christmas. Desertion is one phase of the war we have not loved to dwell upon. The writer remembers in his boyhood having seen a man pointed out as a deserter from a North Carolina regiment, who had been in hiding until peace came, and who then left the State, returning some years later only to find his ignominy stamped upon him quite as plainly as those dreadful letters which the branding-iron used to set forever upon the foreheads of murderers and others who by a most narrow chance escaped the gallows. People looked at this man; he had no footing, no place in the public esteem, and he could never recover his lost balance in the Commonwealth. So it was but natural that, forty-two years after the war had ended, when the writer's attention was called to the fact that there was a deserter in the North Carolina Soldiers' Home at Raleigh, he lost no time in telling the directors, who held a court martial or court of inquiry; the fact was proved and the man summarily dismissed, to the great comfort of the honorable soldiers in whose company this disreputable associate had been temporarily thrown.

People coming into Raleigh from the westward on the trains, observe to the northward a wide, stretching field of cotton, with a great barn rising in its center; in the middle distance rather low undergrowth, and far away, rising like plumes, the foliage of lofty pines. That foreground was in the great civil war the drill-ground of many thousands of the splendid troops North Carolina trained for combat. The woods in the

middle distance were filled with their huts and tents, and the trees in the background mark the place where the mines of black lead, or plumbago, lie among the high and rugged hills through which a swift stream, very mountainlike, makes its way. No one would ever dream that, in this lead mine region, startlingly near the place where soldiers who were punished for minor offences worked, getting out the material for the Confederate War Department, in a cave the existence of which was unsuspected, the most daring deserters in this part of North Carolina lived for more than two years; literally lived on the community, and though sought for ceaselessly were never found.

There were seven of these desperate men, who risked so much to escape the service that their State demanded of them. They were armed with rifles which they had in some way secured, but yet were generally afraid to use, because of the noise they made, and so they depended upon the knife to do their work in killing hogs and other animals for food. Three of these men were married and their wives contrived to locate in the neighborhood and to earn a most precarious living. One of them had two children, twin girls, and it was on account of a remark made by one of these children that the strangest Christmas dinner ever given in the State was brought about; a dinner not eaten in the daytime, but in the night. These women, in the Confederacy but not of it, loved their men, who occupied the same strange position; those cave-dwellers, who underwent practically as much risk to maintain what they called their liberty as did the men at the front, who were in action almost daily. The cave was roomy enough and so set in the hillside, with a southern exposure or slope, that the men never suffered by reason of the cold, and at the entrance a couple of flat rocks gave no hint of footsteps. By day a stone practically filled the already small entrance and forbade the passage of even a dog, should one come prowling there, while there was nothing to attract human attention in the least. If by any chance a light was made in the cave at night it made no showing at the low entrance, and for a light either a wick in hog lard or balls of the sycamore tree, floating in lard, were used. The pains those men took to guard their secret and that of the cave were amazing. They had bedding, stolen from many a house, not too near but often miles away, and some of it brought to the cave in the night time by the three wives, who became as daring and resourceful as the deserters themselves. These men developed incredible qualities, it is said, of seeing in the dark and of hearing, and almost a sixth sense of direction; instinct, let us say, which aided them wonderfully. The savage in the blood came back to them in large degree and so, in summer and winter alike, in fair weather and foul, they lurked by day and went afield and depredated at night, taking in meat cooked by their faithful women, who were worthy of a better cause and a finer aspiration.