

One Christmas eve two of these men were hiding near the home of the wife of one, the mother of the twin girls, when one of the latter spoke, in all the terrors of that time, the very blackest period of the war, that dreadful winter of 1864-65, of "Christmas" then of all things, one would think, furthest from the minds of the outlaw parent. But the thought struck home and the woman, poor creature, caught at it and with a bravery worthy of any cause said she would bring something to the cave the following night and take the children too. And so she prepared food which her husband and the other men had stolen and placed in her hands and some things which she herself contrived to obtain, among the latter being a Confederate candle, made of a wick soaked in tallow and bees-wax and wrapped around a corn cob, with one end projecting upwards so that it formed a taper for lighting.

As the afternoon of Christmas day drew on this poor creature and her girls worked their way nearer and nearer to the vicinity of the cave, looking fearfully about them, one may be sure, very like wild beasts whom they imitated in their habits and modes of life, and when darkness settled down to utter gloom, which was coupled with the solitude of that lonely place, the starless night, the rushing water of the stream, the wind-swept trees which topped the wild and rugged hills and all the tangle of the mines, some long disused, they literally felt their way, the father leading the little ones, to the cave-mouth. The stone which usually closed the entrance had been pulled away on two slides of logs by the men inside, and into the entrance-way man, woman and children crawled. The stone was replaced and a scene which seemed not of our age was revealed to the woman. She knew what was there, but yet could not realize it. Bayonets and swords were stuck in the walls to form hanging-places for all sorts of plunder. Revolvers were here and there; loaded muskets rested against the sides of the cave; half mouldy bedding covered much of the floor; a rude bucket contained water brought from the stream near by; bits of lightwood were in a corner, and in a pan was meat, cooked and uncooked, and rough corn bread. There was plunder which these men had taken from houses far afield, in the hope that sometime they would be able to give it to their woman-kind. Unshorn and unshaved, with every article secured by theft, and in some cases by violence with it, the men looked like buccaners; as if they might have stepped from the deck of some pirate ship of three centuries before, and like the crew of the Flying Dutchman, the Wandering Jew or some other of those fabled characters, retained life and vigor.

But there were the wife and the two girls; the light, the real candle of the time; the Christmas cheer; the poor woman in her dress of roughest homespun, with shoes of untanned cow skin, with bonnet heavily quilted and tied about her ears to keep out the cold, and a cape made of parts of soldiers' overcoats a pitiful figure herself; while the girls, like her, wore home-made stuff from head to foot and looked as wild and vagrant almost as the desperate men themselves. Whatever smiles the men had, and to be sure they were few in such

a case as theirs, were given the three visitors and the bustling little woman, faithful to her lord and master, fixed the poor meal, very good in the sight of those pitiful men, and served it by the illumination of the Confederate substitute for a candle. And so part of the night passed. The men had picked up, in various ways, all sorts of news about the war, and they hinted, more or less broadly, that it must be nearly over. They told of how they had seen trains passing, northward and westward bound, loaded with troops the State was sending to the front, and they also spoke of great movements in the South and West. The woman told her part, too, for she listened day by day and night by night for any news and must in her heart of hearts, poor creature, have wondered what the war's end, whenever it came, would bring to her and hers. Some of the men, talking there that Christmas night, that wonderful night to the children, told of what they intended to do when the war ended, and thought they would walk among their fellows and be unnoticed or at least unmolested. They reckoned wrongly, as time was to show.

After midnight out into the bleak darkness crept the father and two other men, all armed to the teeth and ready for any dreadful thing in the way of offence, the cowering woman and the little girls, and so by devious ways, well known to these trailers in the woods, these night birds of the war time, the three were lead to a point hard by their home, some miles distant. Every rustle of a tree branch, every sound which marked the night-time, meant dread, a halt and preparation for whatever might betide, but nothing happened save these mere alarms, and so mother and children crept into their poor bed and there dreamed perhaps of their Christmas dinner. Winter passed away and spring arrived; not the usual spring, with gentle thoughts, as tender as the flowers which blossomed because of its balmy airs, but a season when war, with iron grip and dreadful future, held the State and the poor stricken Confederacy, and when April came, that mother of months, her showers watered the graves of the dead, while in so many homes there was that sorrow which is so close akin to death itself.

And then the end came, the surrender; all the troops had gone; passed away like the fabric of a dream, it seemed; their camping-place was deserted, the drill-ground bare and showing only the traces of its bitter use; men in blue took the places of those in gray on duty everywhere, in town and along the countryside, and then into the broad light of the daytime came the deserters. If they thought they had come to their own again never were men more deceived in their thinking, for in a few days after the Federal occupation of Raleigh three of them, with the woman and her two children, appeared in the city and walked boldly on the streets. An ill-clad Confederate, only a little while out of service, the buttons on his coat covered with black, recognized one of the men in spite of all his wildness, and a Federal soldier being near he told the latter that the man was a deserter. The man in blue needed no further hint, but walked up to the sorry group, and told them in no uncertain

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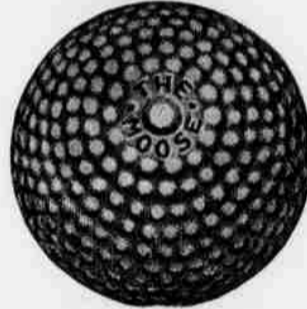
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