JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS

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A Story of a Georgia Boy's Adventures during the War

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Table of Contents

OF FACT AND FICTION IS INSCRIBED
CHAPTER I—JOE MAXWELL MAKES A START
CHAPTER II—A PLANTATION NEWSPAPER
CHAPTER III—TRACKING A RUNAWAY
CHAPTER IV—SHADOWS OF THE WAR
CHAPTER V—MR. WALL'S STORY
CHAPTER VI—THE OWL AND THE BIRDS
THE STORY OF THE OWL.
HOG-FEEDER S SONG.
CHAPTER VII—OLD ZIP COON
CHAPTER VIII—SOMETHING ABOUT "SANDY-CLAUS"
CHAPTER IX—DESERTERS AND RUNAWAYS
CHAPTER X—THE STORY-TELLERS
CHAPTER XI—THE RELIEF COMMITTEE
CHAPTER XII—A GEORGIA FOX-HUNT
CHAPTER XIII—A NIGHT'S ADVENTURES
CHAPTER XIV—THE CURTAIN FALLS
THE END.

OF FACT AND FICTION IS INSCRIBED

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I—JOE MAXWELL MAKES A START

Table of Contents

The post-office in the middle Georgia village of Hillsborough used to be a queer little place, whatever it is now. It was fitted up in a cellar; and the postmaster, who was an enterprising gentleman from Connecticut, had arranged matters so that those who went after their letters and papers could at the same time get their grocery supplies.

Over against the wall on one side was a faded green sofa. It was not an inviting seat, for in some places the springs peeped through, and one of its legs was broken, giving it a suspicious tilt against the wall. But a certain little boy found one corner of the rickety old sofa a very comfortable place, and he used to curl up there nearly every day, reading such stray newspapers as he could lay hands on, and watching the people come and go.

To the little boy the stock of goods displayed for sale was as curious in its variety as the people who called day after day for the letters that came or that failed to come. To some dainty persons the mingled odor of cheese, cam-phene, and mackerel would have been disagreeable; but Joe Maxwell—that was the name of the little boy—had a healthy disposition and a strong stomach, and he thought the queer little post-office was one of the pleasantest places in the world.

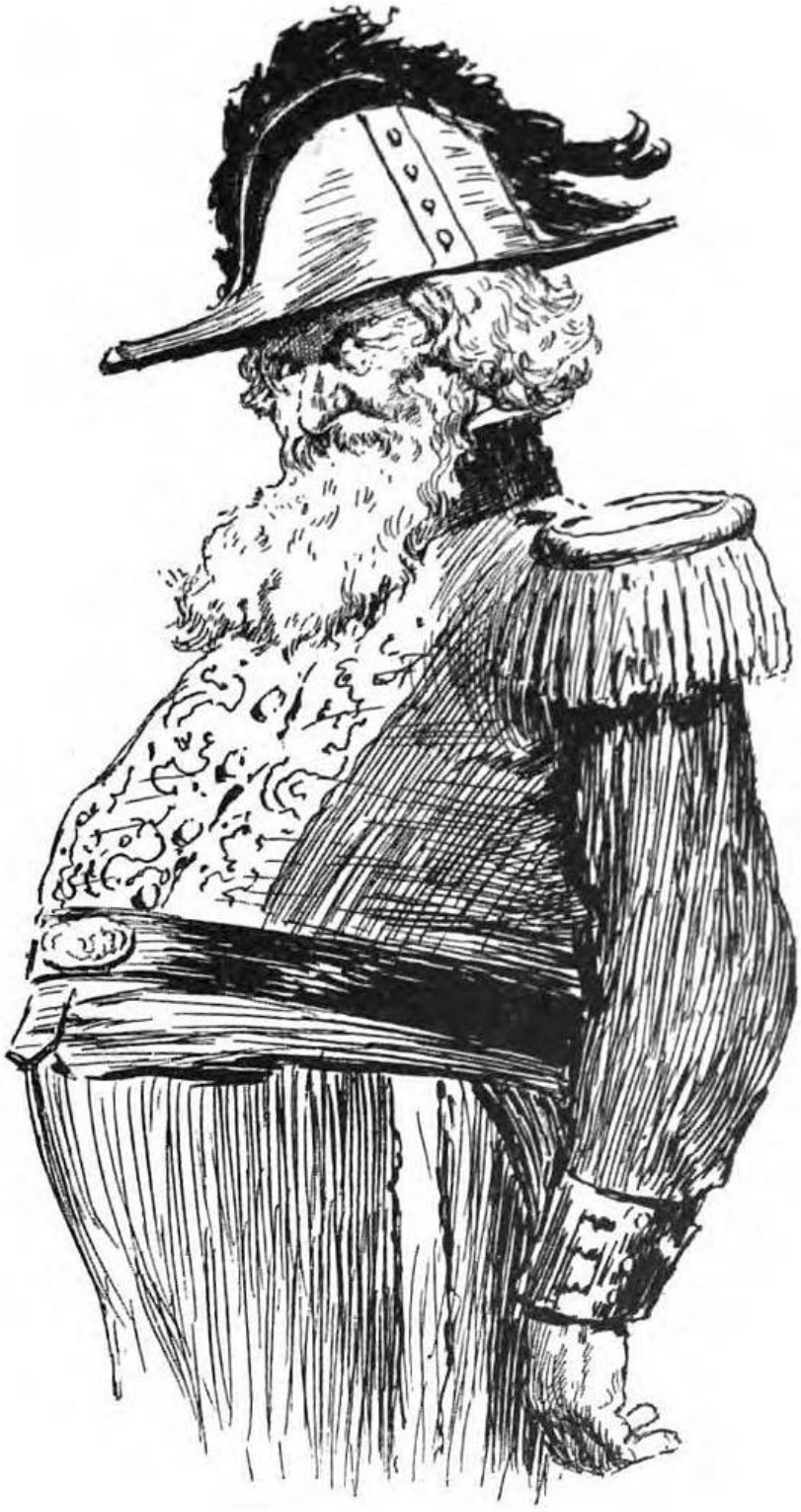
A partition of woodwork and wire netting cut off the post-office and the little stock of groceries from the public at

large, but outside of that was an area where a good many people could stand and wait for their letters. In one corner of this area was the rickety green sofa, and round about were chairs and boxes and barrels on which tired people could rest themselves.

The Milledgeville papers had a large circulation in the county. They were printed at the capital of the State, and were thought to be very important on that account. They had so many readers in the neighborhood that the postmaster, in order to save time and trouble, used to pile them up on a long shelf outside the wooden partition, where each subscriber could help himself. Joe Maxwell took advantage of this method, and on Tuesdays, when the Milledgeville papers arrived, he could always be found curled up in the corner of the old green sofa reading the *Recorder* and the *Federal Union*. What he found in those papers to interest him it would be hard to say. They were full of political essays that were popular in those days, and they had long reports of political conventions and meetings from all parts of the State. They were papers for grown people, and Joe Maxwell was only twelve years old, and small for his age.

There was another place that Joe found it pleasant to visit, and that was a lawyer’s office in one of the rooms of the old tavern that looked out on the pillared veranda. It was a pleasant place to him, not because it was a law-office, but because it was the office of a gentleman who was very friendly to the youngster. The gentleman’s name was Mr. Deometari, and Joe called him Mr. Deo, as did the other people of Hillsborough. He was fat and short and wore

whiskers, which gave him a peculiar appearance at that time. All the rest of the men that Joe knew wore either a full beard or a mustache and an imperial. For that reason Mr. Deometari's whiskers were very queer-looking. He was a Greek, and there was a rumor among the people about town that he had been compelled to leave his country on account of his politics. Joe never knew until long afterward that politics could be a crime. He thought that politics consisted partly in newspaper articles signed "Old Subscriber" and "Many Citizens" and "Vox Populi" and "Scrutator," and partly in arguments between the men who sat in fine weather on the dry-goods boxes under the china-trees. But there was a mystery about Mr. Deometari, and it pleased the lad to imagine all sorts of romantic stories about the fat lawyer. Although Mr. Deometari was a Greek, there was no foreign twang to his tongue. Only as close an observer as the boy could have told from his talk that he was a foreigner. He was a good lawyer and a good speaker, and all the other lawyers seemed to like him. They enjoyed his company so well that it was only occasionally that Joe found him in his office alone.



Mr. Deometari put on his uniform.

Once Mr. Deometari took from his closet a military uniform and put it on. Joe Maxwell thought it was the most beautiful uniform he had ever seen. Gold braid ran down the sides of the trousers, gold cords hung loosely on the breast of the coat, and a pair of tremendous epaulets surmounted the shoulders. The hat was something like the hats Joe had seen in picture-books. It was caught up at the sides with little gold buttons, and trimmed with a long black feather that shone like a pigeon’s breast. Fat as Mr. Deometari was, the lad thought he looked very handsome in his fine uniform. This was only one incident. In his room, which was a large one, Mr. Deometari had boxes packed with books, and he gave Joe leave to ransack them. Many of the volumes were in strange tongues, but among them were some quaint old English books, and these the lad relished beyond measure. After a while Mr. Deometari closed his office and went away to the war.

It would not be fair to say that Joe was a studious lad. On the contrary, he was of an adventurous turn of mind, and he was not at all fond of the books that were in his desk at Hillsborough Academy. He was full of all sorts of pranks and capers, and there were plenty of people in the little town ready to declare that he would come to some bad end if he was not more frequently dosed with what the old folks used to call hickory oil. Some of Joe Maxwell’s pranks were commonplace, but others were ingenious enough to give him quite a reputation for humor, and one prank in particular is talked of by the middle-aged people of Hillsborough to this day.

The teacher of the academy had organized a military company among the pupils—it was just about the time when rumors and hints of war had begun to take shape—and a good deal of interest was felt in the organization, especially by the older boys. Of this company Joe Maxwell was the fourth corporal, a position which gave him a place at the foot of the company. The Hillsborough Cadets drilled every school-day, and sometimes on Saturdays, and they soon grew to be very proud of their proficiency.

At last, after a good deal of manoeuvring on the playgrounds and in the public square, the teacher, who was the captain, concluded that the boys had earned a vacation, and it was decided that the company should go into camp for a week on the Oconee River, and fish and hunt and have a good time generally. The boys fairly went wild when the announcement was made, and some of them wanted to hug the teacher, who had hard work to explain that an attempt of this sort was not in accord with military tactics or discipline.

All the arrangements were duly made. Tents were borrowed from the Hillsborough Rifles, and the drum corps of that company was hired to make music. A half-dozen wagons carried the camp outfit and the small boys, while the larger ones marched. It was an entirely new experience for Joe Maxwell, and he enjoyed it as only a healthy and high-spirited boy could enjoy it. The formal and solemn way in which the guard was mounted was very funny to him, and the temptation to make a joke of it was too strong to be resisted.

The tents were pitched facing each other, with the officers' tent at the head of the line thus formed. At the other end of the lane and a little to the rear was the baggage-tent, in which the trunks, boxes, and commissaries were stored. Outside of all, the four sentinels marched up and down. The tents were pitched in an old field that was used as a pasture, and Joe noticed during the afternoon two mules and a horse browsing around. He noticed, too, that these animals were very much disturbed, especially when the drums began to beat, and that their curiosity would not permit them to get very far from the camp, no matter how frightened they were.

It happened that one of Joe's messmates was to go on guard duty at twelve o'clock that night. He was a fat, awkward, good-natured fellow, this messmate, and a heavy sleeper, too, so that, when the corporal of the guard undertook to arouse him, all the boys in the tent were awakened. All except Joe quickly went to sleep again, but this enterprising youngster quietly put on his clothes, and, in the confusion of changing the guard, slipped out of the lines and hid in a convenient gully not far from the camp.

It was his intention to worry if not to frighten his messmate, and while he lay there trying to think out the best plan to pursue, he heard the horse and mules trampling and snorting not very far off. Their curiosity was not yet satisfied, and they seemed to be making their way toward the camp for the purpose of reconnoitering.

Joe's mind was made up in an instant.

He slipped down the gully until the animals were between him and the camp, and then, seizing a large pine

brush that happened to be lying near, he sprang toward them. The mules and horse were ripe for a stampede. The camp itself was an object of suspicion, and this attack from an unexpected quarter was too much for them. Snorting with terror they rushed in the direction of the tents. The sleepy sentinel, hearing them coming, fired his gun in the air and ran yelling into the camp, followed by the horse and one of the mules. The other mule shied to the right when the gun was fired, and ran into the baggage-tent. There was a tremendous rattle and clatter of boxes, pots, pans, and crockery ware. The mule, crazed with fright, made a violent effort to get through the tent, but it caught him in some way. Finally, the ropes that held it down gave way, and the mule, with the tent flapping and flopping on his back, turned and rushed through the camp. To all but Joe Maxwell it was a horrifying sight. Many of the boys, as the saying is, “took to the woods,” and some of them were prostrated with fright. These were consequences that Joe had not counted on, and it was a long time before he confessed to his share in the night’s sport. The results reached further than the camp. In another part of the plantation the negroes were holding a revival meeting in the open air, preaching and shouting and singing. Toward this familiar scene the mule made his way, squealing, braying, and kicking, the big white tent flopping on his back. As the terrified animal circled around the place, the negroes cried out that Satan had come, and the panic that ensued among them is not easily described. Many thought that the apparition was the ushering in of the judgment-day, while by far the greater number firmly believed that the “Old Boy” himself was after them. The

uproar they made could be plainly heard at the camp, more than a mile away—shrieks, screams, yells, and cries for mercy. After it was all over, and Joe Maxwell had crept quietly to bed, the thought came to him that it was not such a fine joke, after all, and he lay awake a long time repenting the night's work. He heard the next day that nobody had been hurt and that no serious damage had been done, but it was many weeks before he forgave himself for his thoughtless prank.

Although Joe was fond of fun, and had a great desire to be a clown in a circus or to be the driver of a stage-coach—just such a red and yellow coach, with "U. S. M." painted on its doors, as used to carry passengers and the mails between Hillsborough and Rockville—he never permitted his mind to dwell on these things. He knew very well that the time would soon come when he would have to support his mother and himself. This thought used to come to him again and again when he was sitting in the little post-office, reading the Milledgeville papers.

It so happened that these papers grew very interesting to both old and young as the days went by. The rumors of war had developed into war itself. In the course of a few months two companies of volunteers had gone to Virginia from Hillsborough, and the little town seemed to be lonelier and more deserted than ever. Joe Maxwell noticed, as he sat in the post-office, that only a very few old men and ladies came after the letters and papers, and he missed a great many faces that used to smile at him as he sat reading, and some of them he never saw again. He noticed, too, that when there had been a battle or a skirmish the ladies and

young girls came to the post-office more frequently. When the news was very important, one of the best-known citizens would mount a chair or a dry-goods box and read the telegrams aloud to the waiting and anxious group of people, and sometimes the hands and the voice of the reader trembled.

One day while Joe Maxwell was sitting in the post-office looking over the Milledgeville papers, his eye fell on an advertisement that interested him greatly. It seemed to bring the whole world nearer to him. The advertisement set forth the fact that on next Tuesday the first number of *The Countryman*, a weekly paper would be published. It would be modeled after Mr. Addison's little paper, the *Spectator*, Mr. Goldsmith's little paper, the *Bee*, and Mr. Johnson's little paper, the *Rambler*. It would be edited by J. A. Turner, and it would be issued on the plantation of the editor, nine miles from Hillsborough. Joe read this advertisement over a dozen times, and it was with a great deal of impatience that he waited for the next Tuesday to come.

But the day did come, and with it came the first issue of *The Countryman*. Joe read it from beginning to end, advertisements and all, and he thought it was the most entertaining little paper he had ever seen. Among the interesting things was an announcement by the editor that he wanted a boy to learn the printing business. Joe borrowed pen and ink and some paper from the friendly postmaster, and wrote a letter to the editor, saying that he would be glad to learn the printing business. The letter was no doubt an awkward one, but it served its purpose, for when the editor of *The Countryman* came to Hillsborough he

hunted Joe up, and told him to get ready to go to the plantation. The lad, not without some misgivings, put away his tops and marbles, packed his little belongings in an old-fashioned trunk, kissed his mother and his grandmother good-by, and set forth on what, turned out to be the most important journey of his life.

Sitting in the buggy by the side of the editor and publisher of *The Countryman*, Joe Maxwell felt lonely indeed, and this feeling was increased as he went through the little town and heard his schoolmates, who were at their marbles on the public square, bidding him good-by.

He could hardly keep back his tears at this, but, on looking around after the buggy had gone a little way, he saw his friends had returned to their marbles, and the thought struck him that he was already forgotten. Many and many a time after that he thought of his little companions and how quickly they had returned to their marbles.

The editor of *The Countryman* must have divined what was passing in the lad's mind (he was a quick-witted man and a clever one, too), for he tried to engage in conversation with Joe. But the boy preferred to nurse his loneliness, and would only talk when he was compelled to answer a question. Finally, the editor asked him if he would drive, and this Joe was glad enough to do, for there is some diversion in holding the reins over a spirited horse. The editor's horse was a large gray, named Ben Bolt, and he was finer than any of the horses that Joe had seen at the livery-stable. Feeling a new and an unaccustomed touch on the reins, Ben Bolt made an effort to give a new meaning to his name by bolting sure enough. The road was level and hard,

and the horse ran rapidly for a little distance; but Joe Maxwell's arms were tough, and before the horse had gone a quarter of a mile the lad had him completely under control.

"You did that very well," said the editor, who was familiar with Ben Bolt's tricks. "I didn't know that little boys in town could drive horses."

"Oh, sometimes they can," replied Joe. "If he had been scared, I think I should have been scared myself; but he was only playing. He has been tied at the rack all day, and he must be hungry."

"Yes," said the editor, "he is hungry, and he wants to see his mate, Rob Roy."

Then the editor, in a fanciful way, went on to talk about Ben Bolt and Rob Roy, as if they were persons instead of horses; but it did not seem fanciful to Joe, who had a strange sympathy with animals of all kinds, especially horses and dogs. It pleased him greatly to think that he had ideas in common with a grown man, who knew how to write for the papers; and if the editor was talking to make Joe forget his loneliness he succeeded admirably, for the lad thought no more of the boys who had so quickly returned to their marbles, but only of his mother, whom he had last seen standing at the little gate smiling at him through her tears.

As they drove along the editor pointed out a little log-cabin near the road.

"That," said he, "is where the high sheriff of the county lives. Do you know Colonel John B. Stith?"

“Yes,” Joe replied; “but I thought he lived in a large, fine house. I don’t see how he can get in at that door yonder.”

“What makes you think he is too big for the door?” asked the editor.

“Why, the way he goes on,” said Joe, with the bluntness of youth. “He is always in town talking politics, and he talks bigger than anybody.”