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NECK OR NOTHING.

AN EPIC STORY OF ANTE BELLUM DAYS,

BY JEANNETTE M. WALWORTH

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CHAPTER XII.
"To the front, or wherever there's fightin' to do. He says he can't sit in the chimney corner sucking his thumb's while other men are taking their chances for the bullets. Oh, I tell you there ain't no discount on ole man Strong."

Strong winced and involuntarily moved farther away from the chimney corner. Presently he broke out passionately:

"It is a — shame. The whole thing is an infernal mistake. Making butchers out of men who wouldn't harm a hair on a dog's back if left to their own devices. Now, if the army was made up exclusively of such sneaks as Adrien Strong, the country could survive its loss."

"Adrien Strong don't pass for a sneak in Virginia, where the fightin' is hottest."

"Perhaps not."

Strong looked so ugly as he snarled out those two words that Seth forbore communicating the laudatory rumors that were afloat in the neighborhood about Adrien Strong.

Silence fell between the two men. Seth's mission had failed. He would wait and take his supper of black coffee and fried bacon with Strong, then climb the cliff and go home.

The darkness deepened within and without. Old Viney came into the room with a globeless kerosene lamp in her hand, placed it in the middle of the table, flung a pine knot in the fire and hobbled slowly out again.

The insistent rain, made invisible by the interior illumination of lamp and firelight, pattered dismally upon the hard beaten surface of the dooryard. The clock on the rough pine shelf over the fireplace gave a premonitory cluck and struck seven.

Viney made a second grand entre, laden down with plates and cups and saucers, which she arranged upon the table with considerable clatter and no taste whatever. She was hobbling slowly toward the door once more when something caused her to lift her turbaned head and to stand still in an alert attitude of surprised attention.

"I yhers 'wheels," she said, turning automatically toward the two men on the hearth.

"Wheels!"

They laughed incredulously. No one ever sought Neck or Nothing on wheels under the brightest sunlit skies. Who should be groping thither in this storm drenched darkness?

"You kin snicker s'long as you aint got no manners, but I yhers 'em all de same. Dey done stop."

She hobbled to the front door and sang it open with assertive violence, sending a yellow band of light athwart the wet beaten walk between the cabin and the still.

"She is right. Hail Columbia! Who can it be?" said Seth, rising quickly in his astonishment.

Strong lifted himself more deliberately. Not even the unprecedented possibility of visitors to Neck or Nothing on this inclement evening could stir him beyond the point of looking behind the door for his umbrella and lifting his lantern from the floor with a tentative swing to decide if there was any oil in it. Then he joined Seth and Viney in the open doorway.

What they saw was a close buttoned, mud bespattered carryall, between the shafts of which stood a steaming, weary beast of burden with dejected, down dropped head and dripping harness.

What they heard was the sound of voices parleying behind the wet curtains—women's voices, young voices which stimulated the curiosity of the two men without enlightening them.

"I suppose we've got to see it through," said Strong, and he plunged resolutely out into the rain, closely followed by Seth. A few strides brought them to the stile, against whose outer steps the carriage was drawn closely for the convenience of the travelers.

A child's fretful protest against broken slumber, a woman's querulous response, a cheerful gurgle of encouragement, a lifted curtain and a boundless surprise.

"Well!"

"'Pon honor!"

"Strong Martin!"

"Mamie Colyer!"

Of course the woman was the first to grow coherent.

"If it were not so excessively damp on this stile, I should feel impelled to sit right down on this platform until I got the better of my feelings. Annabel, Ann, my dear, where do you suppose we have fetched up finally?"

A white, tired face, pretty but peevish, had been thrust from between the parted curtains. To it Miss Colyer had addressed herself.

"At Mr. Martin's, haven't we? You told that awful imbecile to take us to Mr. Martin's."

"En I done it," said the "awful im-

becile" in stolid resentment. "Them that is bofe of 'em Misterosee Martin."

"There is no denying that," said Strong, with such a bright ring to his voice that Seth glanced away from the phenomenon of their lady visitors to stare at Strong in fresh bewilderment.

He had no clew to Strong's one love secret. Mamie Colyer's name and her bold championship of his cause were too sacred for idle comment.

"And your mother will take two badly wrecked women and a famished child in for the night?" Mamie was demanding eagerly, looking down upon them from the stile, with her skirts gathered closely about her trim ankles in preparation for descent.

"My mother lives three miles from here," said Strong, holding out his hand to assist her.

She drew back with a frightened gasp.

"Goodness! Anna, do you hear that?"

"I don't hear anything but this cross, ugly boy crying for something to eat. Adrien, I shall certainly go crazy if you don't shut up."

Mamie sprang resolutely to the ground.

"Lead the way, Mr. Martin. We cannot spend the night on this stile. Driver, fetch in Mrs. Strong's bags and boxes."

Strong had already tucked her cold little hand in his arm and turned his face toward the cabin. It was good to have her there. Her sweet, strong face, seen only dimly as yet by the light of his lantern, was unchanged. Her power of lifting the burdens from other shoulders was in full force yet. He scarcely gave a thought to the mystery of her companion's name.

"Isn't this just too funny?" She cuddled a trifle closer to him. "Don't be selfish, you are carrying two-thirds of that umbrella over your own shoulders and one-third over mine."

"Pardon me."

He immediately shifted the entire protection to her, by which time they had reached the cabin door, where old Viney stood looking at them in severe surprise.

(To be Continued.)



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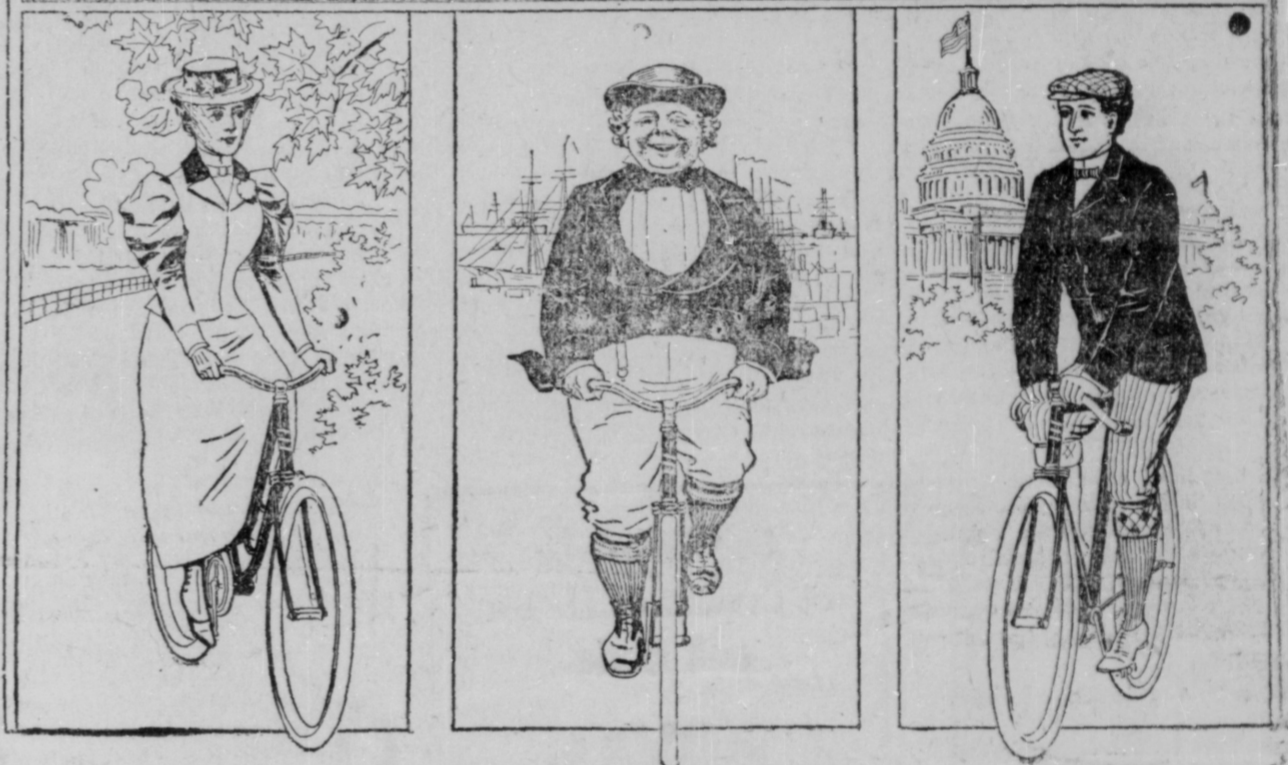
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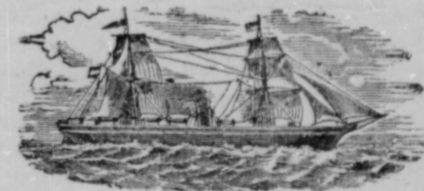
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