



# NECK OR NOTHING

A SOUTHERN STORY OF ANTE BELLUM DAYS  
BY JEANNETTE H. WALWORTH

CHAPTER V.

"My daughter-in-law's steward" was the facetious way in which he referred to Eben Martin among the neighbors. Eben Martin and his wife and his sons were among the many things that were simply tributary to the fuller, freer life of the big house. Therefore it presented itself in the light of a duty that Mrs. Strong should see that the domestic machinery of her overseer's house was kept in smooth working order.

As a conscientious sovereign she was minded to look into everything fearlessly. She was seriously disturbed about this vivid, esoteric girl, who was given to violent horseback exercise and bewitching red pompons. Under the given circumstances she considered her father-in-law's selection of the word "meddle" as not only inappropriate but bordering on the offensive.

Finding a discussion of the Martins and their domestic affairs inevitable, the governor resignedly laid his spectacles across the pile of unopened papers and went into the subject with some acerbity.

"Yes, 'meddle.' That was the word I used. I have come to look upon the whole Martin brood as an ungrateful and stiff-necked lot. Really, I have, Adele, my dear."

"Why?"

"Well, Eben stood out so stubbornly for a reduction in the price I had placed on Neck or Nothing. I never would have sold the land at all had not that boy Seth stubbornly refused to remain on the place unless I would sell him land to start a small place for himself. As for the second son, my namesake, Strong, his attitude is nothing short of incomprehensible. He refused point blank to be Adrien's traveling companion, although the fellow is so quick and intelligent I would rather have paid his expenses twice over than to have sent Adrien off with that dullard, Spencer."

"Mr. Spencer belongs to a very good family, father, and he is not likely to embarrass my son by any social blunders. Perhaps young Martin thinks he has accepted enough at your hands. Moreover, it is quite time he was getting to work. I believe the plan is for him to study under Dr. Whitcomb?"

"Was, but, hang it all, he positively refuses to go into Whitcomb's office."

"Refuses? Refuses to study medicine under one of the best practitioners in the south?"

"So Eben told me yesterday."

"What does he propose to do, pray?"

"He is going to move on to the peninsula."

"Neck or Nothing? Impossible! What would he do there?"

"Open it for Seth, is the plan. At any rate, he is going there to live or work or rust"—the governor gave an impatient outward sweep of his delicate hands—"or rot there. Confound the fellow, I never was more disappointed in any one in all my life."

"But there is no house on the Neck. It is a brambly wilderness, a dreary, fenceless, out of the way hole."

"It is all that or a little less. Zeke's old cabin is still standing on it. Rather a dilapidated mansion to be chosen by a college valetudinarian, with all the world before him."

"Upon my word and honor!" Mrs. Strong's amazement was boundless. "He must be lacking in ordinary perception of his duty as a man of education and ability. Totally without ambition, I suppose. His class generally is."

The governor caressed his chin reflectively.

"No, his entire college record is against that theory. I am afraid he has left Shingleton under something of a cloud. I saw Redmond in town yesterday and was talking with him about Strong. He would not speak out plainly, but hinted darkly that Strong, in the last months of his stay at Shingleton, had tarnished a brilliant record and stripped himself of well won laurels."

"I wonder what he did? Strange that Adrien should have given you no hint. Not strange, either. My son could never be ungenerous to a comrade."

"I did not inquire further. If it had been Adrien, I should have compelled Professor Redmond to be more explicit. But, to come back to this little girl of Eben's, I really do not see that she comes within your province, my dear."

"Then I must bring her within it," she said haughtily, and turned toward her waiter. "Drake, you will watch for Miss Martin as she rides home. Stop her, and tell her that I want to see her very particularly this morning. She will find me in the morning room. You can clear off the table."

The governor accepted these orders to Drake as his own much wished for dismissal and rose with alacrity. Piling his arms full of newspapers he went off briskly in direction of his study. Once inside of its heavy, carved door no sound, no intrusion of petty local affairs, would disturb him.

In answer to Drake's somewhat flip-

pantly delivered message from "the madam," Liza sprang from the saddle as she was riding homeward an hour later, flung the bridle to the boy, and, gathering her long skirt over her arm, walked sedately into "the madam's" presence.

She knew quite well where to find the object of her search. Before she had been sent off to that Baltimore school she and Gabriella had studied together in the morning room. It looked out over the heliotrope and violet beds that were overshadowed by the crimson pomegranate bushes and the flame of the flowering quinces. The scent of heliotrope always brought back those days to her—brought back the pinched, intellectual face of the little governess, who had discriminated with cruel candor between Gabriella, refined, delicate, sensitive, and the pretty hoiden from the quarters, who was admitted on sufferance and had her opportunities thrown at her as bones are thrown to a stray dog. She had hated the governess in those unequal days, had always hated her, in fact, but Gabriella, never. Her she had loved always. Her she had mourned bitterly, if briefly, when the news came of her taking off in earliest womanhood. Gabriella had been her senior by six years, but they had stood and studied heart to heart.

(To be Continued.)



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