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**NECK OR NOTHING**  
A SOUTHERN STORY OF ANTE BELLUM DAYS.  
By JEANNETTE H. WALWORTH.  
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**CHAPTER XII**  
Seth, never erect, but grown still rounder shouldered and more slouching as the years bent him earthward under their unyielding demand for his best, looked old and careworn by contrast.

His gentle blue eyes were fixed wistfully upon the young giant sulking on the other side of the hearth from him. Several times his lips parted, as if he were growing weary waiting for Strong to speak the words he ought to speak, but as often he closed them again patiently.

He was a man of infinite patience, but even Seth's patience had its limitations, which were reached suddenly at last.

Strong slowly lifted the heavy tongs, made a lunge at the glowing logs that sent a shower of red gold sparks flying merrily up the black throated chimney, and replacing the tongs against the whitewashed jamb thrust his hands in his pockets, stretched his legs to their utmost capacity and asked with an ostentatious yawn:

"How does sis get on teaching Miss Chambliss high art?"

Seth flung his rough hands out with an impatient gesture.

"Very well, I reckon. They seem to like each other. Are together nearly all the time since Ran went into the army." Then, with a nervous catch in his gentle voice, "You don't think of going inter it at all, I judge, Strong."

Without altering his position Strong removed his eyes from the dancing sparks to Seth's anxious face. Some of the sparks seemed to have been insarred in their somber depths, they glowed with such intense fire as he slowly ground out his reply between his clinched teeth.

"Go into it? No, I'll be — if I do!"

For a second of reflective silence Seth smoothed the creased kneecaps of his jean trousers with his long freckled hands. Then his courage came back to him.

"The Martins ain't cuttin a very good figger in this row now, and it ain't particularly creditable to us, seeing how many of us there is—men Martins, I mean. The old man is out of the question. The niggers are so upset they don't know whether they be standin on their heads or on their heels, and he's just holdin himself in readiness to stampe 'em all, mules and niggers, over on to the Macon hills as soon as Vicksburg falls, which it is p'ison sure to do, in my estimation. And he needs all the help I can give him while we stay here or if we skeddaddle. We're jus' waitin for the gov'ner to give the word, and the gov'ner he's just waitin to hear from some army friend he's wrote to for advice on the situation. And Charlie, he's such a delicate chap that ma would just fret herself plum' crazy if he was to 'list. And so—"

Strong split the sentence in twain with an unpleasant laugh.

"And so, as I am not needed anywhere in particular, and no one is at all likely to fret themselves 'plum' crazy' if I were to be picked off by a Yankee bullet or snuffed out by camp fever, you came down this afternoon to urge my enlistment."

Seth looked at him with sorrowful rebuke.

"You air as raw these days, Strong, as a piece of liver, I reckon it comes of not being quite satisfied with yourself. But you needn't cut up rough with me. God knows, and so do you, Strong Martin, that nothin on the top of this green earth would please me better than to be foot loose right now, when there's so much man's work to be done. I don't suppose you are quite ready yet to tell me to my face that I am a liar and a coward, are you?"

He had taken tight hold of his coat lapels with his wrinkled, freckled hands, as if feeling the necessity for strong personal restraint. His lean, stooping figure was uplifted defiantly. All the temper he could possibly command on such short notice flashed from his protruding blue eyes.

Strong laughed as he leaned over and passed a soothing hand over his brother's baggy kneed trousers.

"Save your ammunition for the enemy, buddy Seth. I wasn't flinging at you. I don't think any of the Martins are cowards, and you are the pluckiest Martin of the whole tribe. But, Seth Martin," seizing the tongs and giving another savage lunge at the fire, "this is not the Martins' fight. It is Adrian Strong's fight, curse him, and it is Randall Chambliss' fight. It is a fight for and about the nigger. And the only ones concerned in it are those who own the nigger and those who don't want him to be owned. It is not your fight, it is not father's nor mine. If every black skin in the universe was freed to-morrow, it would be better for you and the rest of the Martins."

Seth laughed incredulously.

"Mebbe so, but as they ain't never goin to be free I reckon us Martins will

just have to botcher long with 'em like we've been doin, father and son, since the year one. I don't much fancy that trip over to the Macon hills. It won't be no play work movin all the heads 'and the work stock back 40 miles from the river, to say nothin of the sheep and cattle. It might a-b'en a easy job in the days of father Abram and Isaac and Jacob, but it will be somethin of an undertakin for the old man's self me."

"Suppose the negroes won't go?"

"Won't go!" Seth roared. "Well, I reckon we don't expect to waste no time consultin their wishes on the subject. The plan of the campaign is already mapped out. We are just waitin for the word go from the gov'ner. Pa will lead the van with the men and the mules, and I will be rearguard to the women and children and cattle. You see the gov'ner wants 'em all run back to the hills before he starts out himself."

"Starts out where to?"

"To join the army and Adrien."

"I thought he was a Union man?"

"So he was. So he was. He wanted to save the Union. You know he did. Ole man Strong is true grit to the backbone. Don't you mind his speech at the big ratification meetin? How he begged 'em almos' with the tears in his eyes not to do nothin that couldn't be undone? How he warned 'em they was playing with a sword that could cut two ways? Don't you recolle? Strong, when the ord'nance of secess was passed an everybody was a-whoopin an a-hollerin an grabbin for blue cockades, how the ole man's head dropped till his white beard touched the bottom button on his vest? I was a-lookin square at him, and I could almos' a-swore, Strong, that I saw the water a-standin in his ole eyes."

"Perhaps you did. The governor is rather emotional, and he was a Union man all the way through," said Strong coldly.

"You make me feel like I had took a drink of ice water when I wasn't thirsty. Strong. Well, Union man or no, the gov'ner is gettin ready to go out himself."

"Go out where?"

(To be Continued.)

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