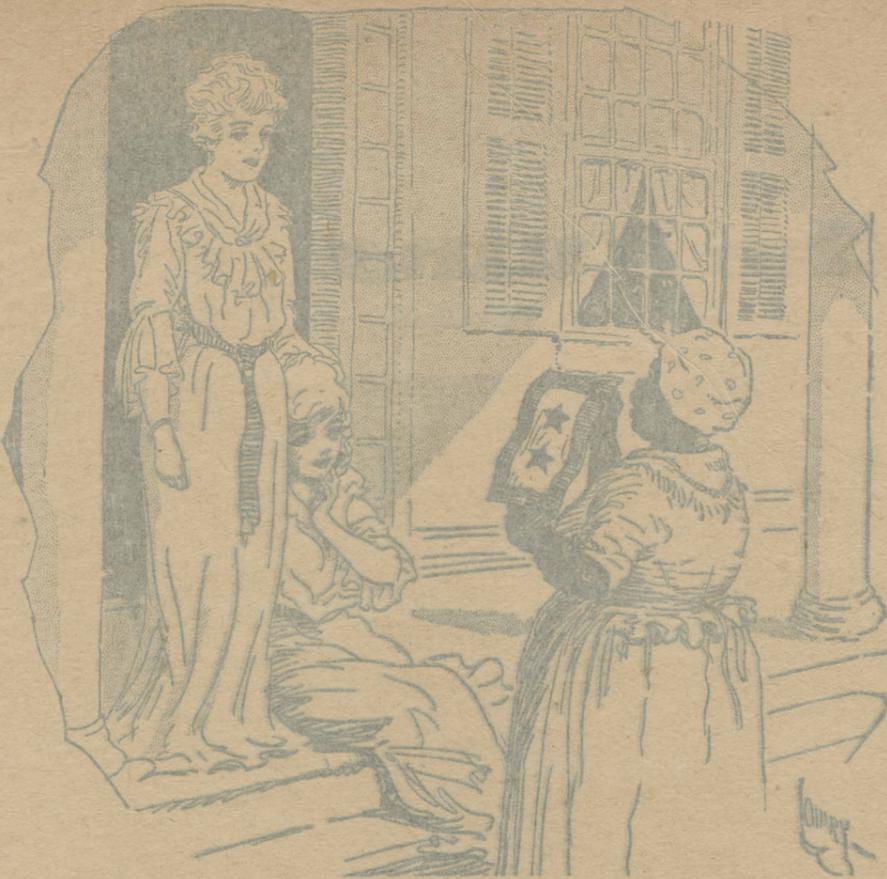


HER BOYS

By
JACK LAIT



"Ain' no black nor no white," said Sallie. "Only one color—true blue."

Life Bade Fair to Separate Them, but War Brought Their Paths Together.

IN some portions of the south it is still the boast of the white folks that some of the darkies "don't know they're free." The colored race has spread, traveled far to stretch and seek and revel in the luxury of that equality which has, to most of the dark-skinned tribe, become so familiar that where once there was truckling humility, there is today militant liberty—not so seldom, arrogance.

The white legislators framed and executed two amendments to our constitution to proclaim and establish the Negro as a citizen of unqualified status; the Negro has, ever since, been straining to prove those amendments. The white man has not always encouraged him in this or blessed him for it. But a constitutional amendment is a powerful staff, and now the blackest grandson of a slave may vote, be hanged in full and due process of the law, hold office, wear spats, or enjoy any other prerogative extended a Warren of Virginia, a Spuytenham of New York, or a novelist of Indianapolis.

Only socially does the child of African progenitors suffer discrimination, and no constitution has ever yet been amended so that it can bring the smile of welcome to the lips where the venom of prejudice sleeps in the bosom—not in a couple of generations, anyway. So the blacks segregate themselves, largely, in northern cities, and there they feel the chasm between them and the untrained exercise of their yearn for full brotherhood with the Caucasians much more keenly than do their cousins who have remained in Dixie, where they were once merchandise, and where today the grandchildren of their grandparents' masters are more indulgent with them, more at home with them and to them, than the abolitionists' descendants in the upper regions of the map.

Down in Georgia live the Atkinsons. Where would Atkinsons live but in Georgia? There stands the old Atkinson home where it stood when Sherman passed ten miles distant on his way to the Atlantic. It isn't the home now, but it still stands on the old place, and the smart, new family bungalow with the stuccoed garage seems less congruous with the atmosphere of the estate than does the aged, warped residence with its colonial porch posts and its peeling white paint.

When Carter Atkinson IV. was a little boy playing over the expansive grounds which had been his great-grandfather's and would one day be his and, probably, his great-grandson's, he looked for all the world like the first American Carter Atkinson had, right there, back in 1830; and beside him, in the romper and bobbed hair age, had a favored little, bow-legged Sam Atkinson, very black, just as black as his grandfather had been when he had frolicked with his little master and owner-to-be.

Now Carter had grown to be quite a man, and was not often at the storied Atkinson place, for he was in his senior year at a

university in Massachusetts. And Sam wasn't about very much, either, for he traveled most of the time with a vagrant minstrel show through remote parts, playing at crossroads and in scarcely accessible hamlets.

The two mothers still lived in Georgia, though—the beautiful, aristocratic, fashionable Mrs. Atkinson, the widowed proprietor of all she could see with a high-priced field glass, and Sallie Atkinson, the servant, the shiny, black, fat, widowed proprietor of nothing she could see; rich in nothing but her Sam, who wasn't in sight.

Sallie was about the age of Mrs. Atkinson, Carter's mother, and her son, Sam, was about the same age as Carter was. She had been nurse and playmate to both the lads, leading Carter and dragging Sam through the troubles but winsome years of babyhood, then childhood, then budding maturity. After that the task drew away from her—the white one and the black one, for Carter no longer needed her guidance and company, and Sam wouldn't have much of them, regarding himself as grown up and able to shift about as a free agent.

And shift he did, as do the shiftless. He hadn't run away; he had just ambled off. A whistling, lanky, shuffling, not much account Negro, he had consorted with the boys of his class and age in the village, eased into an amateur quartet, hiked off with a vaudeville minstrel troupe.

Now and then he straggled home, and Sallie was always hysterical with joy at his coming, though she ragged him severely for his low-down ways and his plebeian, calling, unworthy of his rearing, his forbears, and her ambitions for him, ambitions which contemplated that he remain at home and become a respectable cotton picker at \$3.20 a day, instead of ramping off, goodness knew where, to give trashy shows with a parcel of low-bred, egregious blacks.

Sam loved his mammy, but he loved his career, too, and he wouldn't abandon it. The lazy, irresponsible, roving life, with its by-products of adulation, gin, and dice, suited him from the crinkled hair of his woolly head to the worn-through soles of his pulpy shoes. Sallie was a bit proud of him in her heart, but she never admitted that, for she was a good Christian and a sane citizen, and realized that minstreling was iniquitous business for the soul, the stomach, and the purse.

Sallie wasn't much of a bookworm, and, though she could read, rarely consulted even the periodical prints. Therefore, when the great war set Europe on fire and staggered the world, she wasn't much shaken by it. She knew, of course, there was a war, that Germany was the villainous aggressor and poor Belgium the violated victim, but just what it was all about she had never studied. Europe was a long way off, and she had her linens and dusters to look after, and a few colored snips to manage, notably Celia, who was a coquette and a minx, and who was, also, her first assistant.

But when this country declared war Sallie pricked up her ears. War meant soldiers, soldiers meant young men, young men meant Sam—and Carter, her boys.

How much it meant then she realized with in a week, for Carter hurried home at the first reveille to enlist, and Sam came dragging his ill-clothed "dogs" in a few days later.

"Mammy, I come home fo' to 'nlist," said Sam. "Ah walked twenty miles to get hyere."

"Spoke like a man, a boy o' mine, a Atkinson, an' a free-bo'n 'Merican," said Sallie. "Ouah people sho' owe plenny to the Stahs an' Stripes, an' I guess when it comes to shoutin'—an' shootin'—fo' liberty, that's one time the white folks ain' got nothin' on us."

Carter was sent off to an officers' camp, brevetted a lieutenant, transferred to a cantonment to drill drafted recruits and volunteers. He was placed to officer a colored regiment. One of his doughboys was Sam.

Lieut. Atkinson hoped that Sam would behave; he hated to think of having to discipline his first and most enduring playmate, the son of the kindly Sallie who had married him. But he knew Sam's proclivities, his indolent promptings, and he feared. He feared without grounds. Sam wasn't much of a sensation as a soldier, but he was deferential, obedient, always within the rules. He wasn't promising material for the stripes of the noncom, but neither was he ever a candidate for the guardhouse.

There was nothing much of the soldier in Sam's external effect, either. The army shoes seemed to fit him as poorly as the ones he had selected in civilian and professional life, and his elongated, convex shanks were drool in the rude canvas leggings of the infantry private. But everything was regulation—a man can only dress himself to abide by the requirements of the code, he cannot be asked to rebuild himself. They say Napoleon was knock-kneed, which is scandalously unsoldier-like and unethical in a hero, but still Napoleon turned out to be quite a fellow until Waterloo, which was lost, undoubtedly, by the fact that his knees barked one another. Sam did not give one the impression of a potential Napoleon even, however.

He drilled as ordered, he kept his rifle reasonably clean and oiled, he answered roll call, he was snoring at taps. His fellows rather liked him, for he had a store of minstrel quips and songs, he lost his pay to them at "craps," and he gave them generously of his tobacco. Carter's tasks would have been easy had he a whole outfit like Sam.

In time camp rumors began to murmur that the division was soon to sail. There is much that a soldier wants to do before he embarks over the treacherous waters of modern Hun-haunted warfare. There is one thing, moreover, that almost every soldier must do before he ships—he must kiss a girl, somewhere, good-by.

Lieut. Carter Atkinson was thinking of just that in his tent.

Private Sam Atkinson was thinking of just that, too, in his.

Sam wanted to whisper a few secrets into the brown ear of Celia, his mother's pet thorn, his own pet darling.

Carter wanted to breathe some scented sentiments to Gladys Sutton, the prettiest and richest and proudest and best-bred girl in his county, and the most wonderful creature in all this universe, in his esteem and estimation.

The sergeant submitted to Lieut. Atkinson a list of men who had asked leave. Carter looked the list over and nodded. Then he looked it over once more.

"I don't see Private Atkinson's name here," said he.

"It isn't there, Lieut. Atkinson," said the sergeant. "He hasn't asked. But I asked him."

"And what did he say?"

"He said that down where he was raised niggabs was raised not to ask; they was given what was thought good for 'em, an' that was what they got."

"Tell Private Atkinson that he is ordered to take three days' leave, to go home and say good-by to his mother and to—to any one else he may have in mind."

The same train carried Carter and Sam—Carter in the parlor car, Sam in the Jim Crow coach.

The Atkinson motor was at the station. Carter motioned Sam to the seat beside the chauffeur. The car spun into the grounds, up the drive to the broad doorway of the magnificent new Atkinson home.

A black woman waddled to the footboard. She flung her arms about Carter, who hugged her, then ran to meet two ladies who were rising from porch chairs on the veranda—a dignified woman of middle age, his mother, and a bewitching young beauty, Gladys.

Sam sidled out, and his mother's arms, open as Carter had withdrawn from them, folded about him. She drew him, still clutching him to her gently quivering bosom, around the corner of the house, out of the

view of the white folks, who might not appreciate the full vehemence of dark emotions—who mightn't want them displayed.

As Sam, breathless, came out of the embrace he saw first a scarlet ribbon, then a black and curly head, then the pretty features of a mischievous mulatto girl, then two red lips outlining two rows of ivory teeth—and there, rising from behind a baby palm, was Celia. She gave a yell of welcome, and in another moment Sallie saw her boy and her chief aid clinging together.

"S—since when this hyere familiarousness?" she gasped.

But no one heard her. The sweethearts were young, he was going off to war—it was no time to brook the news gently.

Those were three memorable, honeyed, painfully jubilant days at the Atkinson place. The two mothers coddled their hero boys, the two girls spoiled their beloved men.

Then came the time for the last farewell before train time. No plans had been announced, but it was known that the regiment was to sail within a few hours. The important talks had been spoken and answered, the fond advice had been given and weddingly acknowledged, the assurances of the occasion had been made on all sides and returned on all others.

Then came the last kisses. Carter, with one arm about his mother and the other about Gladys, walked to the car. Sam, with Celia's waist in one long arm and his mother's in the other, walked behind.

A few more kisses—and then the auto kicked the gravel from under its tires and started off.

Mrs. Carter Atkinson III, who seldom yielded to her feelings, began to weep. Sallie, the tears streaming down her own fat, black cheeks, waddled to her, put her hand gently and with the natural motherly instinct of the Negro woman upon the white and immaculate arm of Georgia's "society" leader, and sobbed:

"Don' you cry, honey."

"O, Sallie," wept Mrs. Atkinson.

And she dropped her head upon the pillow and heaving shoulder of her servant, and gave way.

Celia, leaning against the gate post, had thrown her face upon her arms and was shaking and loudly crying. Gladys Sutton, her own fair face spouted over with tears, came up behind her and laid her hand, the one with the blazing engagement token on its pretty finger, on the bobbing gingham shoulder of the shabby mulatto maiden.

"There, there, Celia," said Miss Sutton. "Don't."

"O, Missie Gladys," wailed Celia. "O, Missie Gladys. You don' know how I love that Sam—you couldn' know—you jes' couldn'."

"I—I think I do," said the golden-haired debutante. "I—I—" and she, too, abandoned resistance and let the grief of the parting possess her.

Sallie was the first to recover.

She came to Celia, turned her stately but not less than affectionately about, and said hoarsely:

"There, you—you go on 'bout yo' work."

Celia complied with halting steps, stopping at each to lament and to wring her brown hands.

Gladys raised her glance, walked to Mrs. Atkinson, and took her hands. The mother and the betrothed of the young officer looked into the eyes of one another with and for sympathy.

"Didn't he look wonderful, our Carter—so soldierly, so manly?" said Mrs. Atkinson.

"Dish' they both look wonderful—both my boys?" said Sallie. "Mah Cahlah, he's the spankin' off'cer in the whole army, an' my Sam, w' his big, flat feet an' all, he's about the fines' niggab privit what's in umah'm."

"My, I was mighty proud of 'em. An' why shouldn' I be? I nussed one of 'em an' hob the other."

"D'yo'-all see mah Sam when he done s'late mah Cahlah? An' d'yo'-all see mah Cahlah s'late mah Sam right back? That was mighty gran' o' him, him a Atkinson, s'lutin' mah Sam, a niggah."

"He was saluting a soldier," said Mrs. Atkinson. "He was saluting an American."

"Yes, ma'am, honey," said Sallie. "See what ah got hyere."

And she drew from her apron pocket a service flag with two stars upon it.

"Two stahs—fo' mah two boys."

The white woman smiled benignly.

"Ain' no black nor no white service stahs," said Sallie. "Ain' only one color—blue—true blue—one color, that's all."

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