



*The Boy Of
Chickamauga*

by Edmund Kirke

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One bleak day in October, 1853, a little boy was playing with his dog on the floor of his father's library, in one of the larger towns of Western Illinois. The dog was not bigger than a piece of chalk; but when the boy ranged the great divinity books into a railway train along the floor, he hopped upon them, and puffed and snorted away, as if he supposed himself some huge engine racing across the country under a full head of steam. "Whiz! whiz!" and "Puff! Puff!" went the dog, and "Hurrah! hurrah!" "Clear the track! Look out for the bullgine!" shouted the boy, until the room shook, and the dusty old worthies on the shelves crawled, trembling into their nightcaps, frightened out of their few wits by this new development of the nineteenth century. How the tall man writing at the desk managed to put two ideas together amid such a din, I never could understand, until my own "Billy Boy" had turned my own library into a railroad-station.

At last the tall man laid down his pen, and, reaching up for his hat, which hung against the wall, caught sight of the boy, the dog, and the "Great Western Railway." Bursting into a merry laugh, he said:

*Willie had a little dog,
Whose coat was white as snow;
And everywhere that Willie went
The dog was sure to go."*

The boy sprang to his feet, and, catching up his own little hat, which lay on a chair in the corner shouted out:

*"And father had a little boy,
Whose face was white as snow;
And everywhere that father went
The boy was sure to go."*

In vain the father said that four-year-old boys should stay at home in stormy weather; the little fellow insisted on going out, and finally carried the point; and always afterwards, "everywhere the father went, the boy was sure to go."

So it came about that, one day in the following summer, when his father went a-shooting, Willie thrust the powder-horn into his pocket, and trudged off upon the prairie with him. They soon started a flock of quails, and Willie's father raised his gun to fire among them; but, the little boy being very near, he hesitated to shoot, lest he should frighten him with the report of the weapon. Willie, seeing the quails flying away, and the gun so strangely hanging fire, cried out, impatiently: "Father, shoot! Why don't you But the father still hesitated; and then the boy, who knew nothing of a gun but that it makes a loud noise, and is a dangerous thing to handle, cried out again: "Why father, are you afraid? Give me the gun! I'll shoot."

The father rested the gun across a log, and the boy fired at the flock of quails. The birds had flown beyond range, and the shot only hit the empty air; but the little boy turned to his father, and said, in a tone of cool and refreshing dignity: "There, father, don't you see there isn't any danger in firing a gun."

It was about this time that Willie went to his first camp-meeting. Many of you have been at camp-meetings, and know that they are religious gatherings held in the open air, and attended by great numbers of people, who go into the woods to worship, and frequently stay there days and weeks. Willie's father was the president of a college; but he also was a clergyman, and a clergyman who never omitted an opportunity of bearing "testimony to the truth," whether in a church, a lecture-room, or at a camp meeting. So it came about that on the occasion I speak of he was asked to occupy a place on the platform, and Willie took a seat beside him.

Another clergyman opened the meeting with prayer; but the prayer had scarcely begun, when one of the congregation — an ill-mannered mule, tethered near by in the timber — set up a most discordant braying which drowned the voice of the speaker, and greatly disconcerted the worshippers. All at once the prayer ceased, and Willie's father, rising, asked that the mule might be led out of hearing. "Why, father," then exclaimed the little boy, " I thought you went for freedom of speech!

"The boy is father of the man," and the small boy is father of the larger boy. This is shown by these little stories, which display traits in Willie's character that made him, long afterwards, put on a blue jacket and trousers and follow his brave father over nearly every battle-field of the Southwest. He loved his father, and wanted to be always with him; he was not afraid of powder, or a shot-gun; and he went, to the full extent, for freedom of speech, —that principle which, though it may not do for asses and mules, lies at the very foundation of human liberty. So, when the South aimed a death-blow at this

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principle, and his father went out to uphold it on the battlefield, it was only natural that Willie should want to go with him, and have another shot at a flock of birds, —though these “birds” were not of the quail species.

His father had been in the army more than a year, and had risen to the command of a regiment, before he consented to take Willie with him as a drummer-boy. Then he went, but had been at the front only a week when the army came in presence of the enemy, and was drawn up in two long lines to wait an attack. When an army is moving, drummer-boys and other musicians march at the head of their regiments; but when it goes into battle, they are sent to the rear, to care for the wounded. On this occasion, however, when Willie’s father rode along the lines encouraging the soldiers to act like men in the coming conflict, he caught sight of the little drummer-boy, standing with his drum over his shoulder, at the very head of the column.

“We are going into the fight, my son,” said the father. “Your place is at the rear.”

“Father,” answered the boy, “if I go back there, everybody will say I’m a coward.”

Well, well,” said his father, “stay where you are!”

He stayed there, and, when the attack began, moved in at the head of his regiment; and though the bullets hissed, the canister rattled, and the shell burst all about him, he came out uninjured. In the midst of the fight, our men were going down before the storm of lead, as blades of grass down before a storm of hail, one of the regimental orderlies was swept from his saddle by a cannon-ball, and his horse went galloping madly over the battlefield. Willie saw the orderly fall, and his horse bound swiftly away; and, leaving the ranks, he caught the frightened animal, and sprang into the fallen man’s saddle. Riding then up to his father, he said: “Father, I’m tired of drumming, —I’d rather carry your orders.”

He was only thirteen years old; but after that, in all the great battles of the Southwest, he acted as orderly for the brave Colonel, carrying his messages through the fiery storm, and riding unharmed up to the very cannon’s mouth, until he was taken prisoner by the Rebels on the bloody field of Chickamauga.

All day long on that terrible Saturday, he rode through the fight by the side of his father, and at night lay down on the ground to dream of his home and his mother. The battle paused when the sun went down; but it had no sooner risen, on the following day, red and ghastly in the smoky air, than the flint crack of musketry and the heavy roar of artillery sounding miles away, told that the brave boys on our

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left were meeting the desperate onset of the enemy. Fiercely the Rebels broke against their ranks, fiercely as the storm-wave breaks on a rock in the ocean; but like a rock, the brave Thomas and his men beat back the wild surges, till they rolled away in broken waves upon our centre and right, where the little boy was with his regiment. Battle and disease had thinned their ranks, and then they numbered scarcely four hundred; but bravely they stood up to meet the wild shock that was coming. Soon the Colonel's horse went down, and giving him his own, Willie hurried to the rear for another, he had scarcely rejoined the ranks, when on they came,— the fierce rangers of Texas and Arkansas, —riding over the brigades of Davis and Van Cleve, and the division of the gallant Sheridan, as if they were only standing wheat all ripe for mowing. One half of the brave sons of Illinois were on the ground wounded or dying but the rest stood up, unmoved in the fiery hurricane which was sweeping in fierce gusts around them. Such men can die, but their legs are not fashioned for running. Soon both their flanks were enveloped in flame, and a dreadful volley burst out of the smoke, and again the brave Colonel went to the ground in the midst of his heroes. Then the boy sprang to his side.

“Are you dead, father, or only wounded?”

“Neither. my boy,” answered the iron man, as he clutched the bridle of a riderless horse, and sprang into the empty saddle. Two horses had been shot under him, and two hundred of his men had gone down forever, but still he sat there unmoved amid the terrible tempest. At last the fire grew even hotter; one unbroken sheet of flame enveloped the little band, and step by step, with their faces to the foe, they were swept back by the mere force of numbers. Then the father said to the boy, “Go, my son, to the rear, fast as your horse's legs can carry you.”

“I can't, father,” answered the lad, “you may be wounded.”

“Never mind me; think of your mother. Go,” said the father, peremptorily.

Obedience had been the rule of the boy's life. He said no more; but, turning his horse's head, rode back to the hospital.*

[* This incident is thus related by an eyewitness of the battle, writing from the field on that terrible Sunday: — Beside Colonel Jaques, of the Seventy-third Illinois, rode his son, a lad of thirteen; a bright, brave little fellow, who believed in his father, and feared nothing. Right up to the enemy, — right up anywhere, — if the father went, there went like boy: but when the bullets swept in sheets and, and grape and canister cut ragged roads through the columns of blue, and splashed them with red, the

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father bade the orderly out of the fiery gust. The little fellow wheeled his horse and rode for the hospital. The hospital was captured, and the boy a prisoner." - B. F. TAYLOR, in *Chicago Journal*.]

The hospital was a few tents clustered among the trees, a short distance in the rear; and thither our wounded men were being conveyed as fast as the few medical attendants could carry them. There the boy dismounted, and set about doing all he could for the sufferers. While thus engaged, he saw his father's regiment emerge from the cloud of flame and fall slowly back towards a wood behind them. In a moment a horde of rangers, uttering fierce yells, poured down on their flanks to envelop the little hand of heroes. The boy looked, and at a glance, took in his own danger. The hospital would inevitably be surrounded, and all in it captured! He had heard of the Libbey, and the prison-pens of Salisbury and Andersonville; and springing upon the back of the nearest horse, he put spurs to its sides and bounded away towards the forest. But it was a clumsy beast, not the blooded animal which had borne him so nobly through the day's conflict. Slowly, it trotted along, though the rowels pierced its flanks till the blood ran down them in a rivulet. The forest was yet a long way off when the rangers caught sight of the boy and the sleepy animal and gave chase, brandishing their carbines and yelling like a regiment of demons. The boy heard the shouts, and slung himself along the side of his horse to be out of range of bullets; but not one of the rangers offered to fire, or even lifted his carbine; for there is something in the breasts of these half-savage men that makes them in love with daring; and this running with a score of rifles following at one's heels is about as dangerous as a steeple-chase, over a country filled with pitfalls and torpedoes.

Soon the rangers' fleet steeds encircled the boy's clumsy animal and one of them seized his bridle, crying out, "Yer a bully 'un; jest the pluckiest chunk uv a boy I uver seed."

Willie was now a prisoner, and prudence counselled him to make the best of a bad business; so he slid nimbly to the ground, and coolly answered "Give me a hundred yards the start, and I'll get away yet, —if my horse *is* slower than a turtle."

"I'm durned ef we won't," shouted the man. "I say, fellers, guv the boy forty rod, and let him go scot free ef he gits fust ter the timber."

"None uv yer nonsense, Tom," said another, who seemed some petty officer. "Luck at the boy's clothes! He's son ter some o' the big 'uns. I'll bet high he b'longs ter ole Linkum hisself. I say, young 'un, hain't ye Ole Linkum's boy?"

“I reckon!” answered Willie, laughing, in spite of his unpleasant surroundings. But what he said in jest was received in earnest; and with a suppressed chuckle the man said: “I knowed it. Fellers, he’s good fur a hundred thousand — so let’s keep a bright eye on him.”

Willie was a boy of truth. He had been taught to value his word above even life; but the men were deceiving themselves, and he was not bound to undeceive them to his own disadvantage. He had heard of the barbarity they had shown to helpless prisoners, and his keen mother wit told him to be silent, for this false impression would insure him kind and respectful treatment. After a short consultation, the rangers told him to mount his horse again, and then led him by a circuitous route, to be out again of range of the bullets of our retreating forces, to a hospital a short distance in the rear of the rebel lines, where a large number of prisoners were gathered. On the way, one of them asked Willie the time of day, and, when he drew out his watch, coolly took it and placed it in his pocket; but they offered him no other wrong or indignity.

Arrived at the station, the leader of the rangers rode up to the officer in charge of the prisoners, and said; “I say, Cunnel, we’s cotched a fish yere as is wuth cotchin’, —one o’ ole Linkum’s boys!”

The officer scrutinized Willie closely, and then said, “Are you President Linkum’s son?”

“No, sir,” answered Willie; “but I am one of Linkum’s boys.”

“Ye telled me ye war, ye young hound!” cried the ranger, breaking into a storm of oaths and curses.

“I did not,” said Willie, coolly; “I let you deceive yourself, —that was all.”

The rangers stormed away as if they were a dozen hurricanes exercising their lungs for an evening concert; but the Colonel, who at first had gone into uncontrollable fit of laughter now turned upon them with a torrent of reproaches. “You ‘re a set of cowards,” he said. “You have got this up to get away front the fight. A dozen of you to guard a twelve-year-old! Begone! Back to the lines every one of you or I’ll report you. Old Bragg has a way of dealing with skulkers such as you are.”

The rangers needed no further hint. They galloped off, and Willie walked away and joined the other prisoners.

About a thousand of our tired and wounded men, under guard of two companies of Rebel soldiers, were collected in an open field not far from the hospital; and with them, without food, without shelter, and with nothing but the hard ground to lie on, the little boy remained till noon of the following day. At night he lay down to rest in a crotch of the fence and counted the stars, as one by one they came out

in the sky, telling of the Great All-Father, who has his home in the high heavens, but comes down to visit and relieve his heart-weary children who are wandering here on the earth. Was he not heart-weary, —heart-weary with thinking of his home and his mother, who soon would be sorrowing for her only son, lost amid the wild storm of battle? And would not God visit and relieve him? As he thought of this, he prayed Rising to his knees, he said the little prayer he had said every morning and evening since his earliest childhood and even as he prayed, a dark cloud broke away over his head, and the north star came out and looked down, as if sent by the good Father to guide him homeward.

He watched the star growing brighter and brighter till its gentle rays stole into his soul, lighting all its dark corners; and then he sunk to sleep and dreamed, — dreamed that a white-robed angel came and took him in its arms and bore him away, above the tree-tops, to his father's tent beyond the mountains. His father was on his knees praying; and while he prayed, the angel vanished, and in its place came the Spirits of his ancestors, — the hunted Huguenots, who had gone up to Heaven from many a blood-sodden battle-field. They took the boy by the hand and said, "Be strong, and fear not. Put your trust in God, and he will show you a safe way out of the wilderness."

In the morning he woke hopeful and stout-hearted. Kneeling down, he prayed again; and then a plan of escape came to him, — clear and distinct as ever plan of battle came to a general. He did not think it out; it came to him like a beam of light breaking into a dark room; or like a world-stirring thought flashing into the soul of genius from the Source of all thought in the heavens. But this thought was not to stir a world; it was only to stir a small boy's legs, and make him a man in resource and resolution. Long he pondered upon it, turning it round and round, and looking at it from all sides; and then he set about working it out into action.

The Colonel commanding the guard was a mild-mannered man with pleasant features, and a heart evidently too good to be engaged in the wicked work of rebellion. Him the boy accosted as he made his morning round among the prisoners. "You seem to be short-handed at the hospital, sir," he said; "I have done such work, and would be glad to be of service." "You're a good boy to think of it," replied the officer, — "too good to be one of Lincoln's boys," — and he laughed heartily at the recollection. "But won't you try to get away if I let you go there?"

"I can't promise," said Willie. "you wouldn't if you were a prisoner."

“No, I wouldn’t,” answered the Colonel, kindly. “But it won’t be safe for you to try. Some of our men are wild fellows, and they would shoot you down as soon as they would a squirrel. The Union lines are twelve miles away and our pickets are thicker than the fleas in this cornfield.”

“I ‘d rather not be shot, — I’d rather be a prisoner,” said Willie, smiling.

“You ‘re a sensible lad,” answered the officer, laughing “I’ll let you into the hospital, and you may get away if you can; but if you are shot, don’t come back and say I did it.”

“I don’t believe in ghosts,” said the little boy, following the Colonel on his rounds, to be sure he should not forget him.

When the officer’s duties were over, he took Willie from the cornfield and gave him in charge to Doctor Hurburt, chief surgeon of the hospital. The doctor was a humane, kind-hearted man, and he laughed heartily at the story of the boy’s capture by the rangers. “You served them right, My little fellow,” he said, “and you are smart, —smart enough to be a surgeon. There is plenty to do here, and if you go to work with a will, I’ll say a good word for you.”

And the kind surgeon did; and Willie’s father afterwards bore him his thanks across many leagues of hostile country.

The hospital was a little village of tents, scattered about among the trees, and in it were nearly a thousand Rebel and Union soldiers, all of them either wounded or dying. Among them Willie worked for a fortnight. He scraped lint for their wounds, bound bandages about their limbs, held water to their parched lips, wrote last words to their far-away friends, and spoke peace to their souls as, weary and sin-laden, they groped their way through the dark valley that leads down to the realm of the departed.

Among the patients was one in whom Willie took especial interest, — a bright-eyed, fair-haired boy, not far from his own age, who had been wounded in the great battle. He was a Rebel boy, but he had gone into the war with the same purpose as Willie, — to do all he could for what he thought was freedom. He had been told that the North wanted to enslave the South, and his soul rose in a strong resolve to give his young life, if need be, to beat back his country’s invaders. In all this he was wrong; but only a demagogue will say that the spirit which moved him was not as noble as that which has led many a Northern lad to be a martyr for real liberty. Young as he was, he had been in half a dozen battles, and in the bloody struggle of Chickamauga had fallen pierced with two Union bullets. For two days and nights he lay on the battle-field before he was discovered by the party of men who brought

him to the hospital. Willie helped to bear him from the ambulance, and to lay him on a blanket in one of the tents, and then went for the chief surgeon. A bullet had entered the boy's side, and another crushed the bones of his ankle. His leg had to come off, and the amputation, the long exposure, and the loss of blood, rendered his recovery almost hopeless. The kind-hearted surgeon said this to Willie, as he finished the operation, and bade him tell it to the Rebel lad as gently as was possible. Willie did this, and then the wounded boy, turning his mild gray eye to Willie's face, said calmly: "I thank you, — but for two days I have been expecting it. I have a pleasant home, a dear mother and a kind little sister, and it is hard to leave them; but I am willing to go, for God has other work for me — up there — where the good angels are working."

He lingered for a week, every day growing weaker and weaker, and then sunk to sleep as gently as the water-drop sinks into the depths of the ocean. A few hours before he died he sent for Willie, and said to him: "You have been very good to me, and I would, as far as I call, return your kindness. My clothes are under my pillow. Take them when I am gone. They may help you to get back to your mother. I am going soon. Be with me when I die."

They laid him away in the ground, and Willie went about his work; but something loving and pure had gone out of his life, leaving him lone and heart-weary. He did not know that the little acts of kindness he had done to the dying boy would be reflected back in his own heart, and throw a gentle radiance round his life forever.

I would like to tell you all the details of Willie's escape, — how he dressed himself in the Rebel boy's clothes, and one cloudy night boldly passed the sentinels at the hospital; how he fell in with several squads of Rebel soldiers, was questioned by them, and safely got away because of his gray uniform; how, on his hands and knees, he crept beyond the Rebel pickets and, after wandering in the woods two days and nights, with only the sun by day and the north star by night to guide him, got within our lines, and, exhausted from want of food and worn out with walking lay down under a tree by the roadside, and slept soundly till the following night approached. I would like to tell you of all this, but if I did there would not be room in the "Young Folks" for the other stories. So I will only say that Willie was roused from his slumbers under the tree by some one shaking him by the shoulder, and, looking up, saw a small party of Union cavalry.

"What are you doing here, my young grayback?" said the orderly, who had awakened him.

Willie was about to answer, when he caught sight of a face that was familiar. It was that of his mother's own brother, Colonel McIntyre, of the forty-second regiment of Indiana Infantry. The boy sprang to his feet and called out, "Why, uncle! don't you know me, — Willie — ? In a moment he was on the back of the Colonel's horse, and on the way to his father.

But what of the boy's father, while his only son was a prisoner with the Rebels, or wandering thus alone in the wilderness? I have told you that slowly and steadily the brave Colonel moved the remnant of his regiment out of the fiery storm on that terrible Sunday. At dusk that day, he threw his men into bivouac at Rossville, miles away from the scene of conflict. There he learned that the regimental hospital had been captured and Willie flung out alone — a little waif — on the turbulent sea of battle. Was he living or dead, — well or wounded? Who could tell him? and what tale could he bear to the mother? These were questions which knocked at the father's heart, drove sleep from his eyelids, and made him, for the first time in his life, a woman. All night long he walked the camp, questioning the stragglers who came in from the front, or the fugitives who had escaped from the clutches of the enemy. But they brought no tidings of Willie. The hospital was taken, they said, and no doubt the boy was captured. This was all that the father learned, though day after day he questioned the new-comers, till his loss was known throughout the army; but he did not give up hope, for something within told him that Willie was living, and would yet be restored to his mother.

At last, after a week had passed, a wounded soldier who had crawled all the way from the Rebel lines came to the camp of the regiment, and said to the Colonel: "I was in the hospital when it was taken. The boy sprung a horse and tried to get away, but was followed by the rangers, and, the last I saw was falling to the ground wounded. They must have killed him on the spot for he gave them a hard ride, and they were a savage set of fellows, — savage as meat-axes."

The next day another came, and he said: "I saw the boy three days ago, lying dead in a Rebel hospital, twelve miles to the southward. He was dead when taken, and lingered till then, but that day he died, and that night was buried in the timber. I know it was Willie, because he looked just like you and he said he was the son of a colonel."

The same day another came, and he said: "I know the boy, — a brave little fellow. — and I saw him only two days ago in the Crawfish hospital. When he was captured, his horse fell on him and crushed

his right leg to a jelly. They had to take it off above the knee. There are a thousand chances to one against his living through the operation.”

Similar accounts were brought by half a score within the following days, but still the father hoped against hope, for something within him said that his boy was safe, and would yet be restored to his mother.

At last, when a fortnight had gone by with no certain tidings of Willie, Captain Pratt, one of the officers of the regiment, came to the Colonel’s tent one morning, and said to him: “I have good news for you, Willie will be back by sunset. You may depend upon it, for in a dream last night, I saw him entering your tent, alive and as well as ever.”

The Colonel had little faith in dreams, and is very far from being himself a dreamer, but the confident prediction of the Captain, according as it did with his own hopes, made a powerful impression on him. All day long he sat in his tent, listening eagerly to the sound of every approaching footstep, and watching intently the lengthening shadows as the sun journeyed down to the western hills. At last the great light touched the tops of the far-off trees, and the father’s heart sunk within him; but then — when his last hope was going out — a quick step and a glad shout sounded outside, and Willie burst into the tent followed by one half of the regiment. The boy threw his arms about his father’s neck, and then the bronzed Colonel, who had so often ridden unmoved through the storm of shot and shell, bent down his head and wept; for this his son was dead, and was alive again, — was lost, and was found.

From Our Young Folks November 1865