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The Littlest Rebel

Edward Henry Peple

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FOREWORD

The play, from which this book is written, was in no sense of the word intended as a war drama; for war is merely its background, and always in the center stands a lonely little child.

War is its theme but not its purpose. War breeds hatred, horror, pestilence and famine, yet from its tears and ashes eventually must rise the clean white spirit of HUMANITY.

The enmity between North and South is dead; it sleeps with the fathers and the sons, the brothers and the lovers, who died in a cause which each believed was just.

Therefore this story deals, not with the right or wrong of a lost confederacy, but with the mercy and generosity, the chivalry and humanity which lived in the hearts of the Blue and Gray, a noble contrast to the grim brutality of war.

The author is indebted to Mr. E.S. Moffat, who has novelized the play directly from its text, with the exception of that portion which appeared as a short story under the same title several years ago, treating of Virgie in the overseer's cabin, and the endorsing of her pass by Lieutenant-Colonel Morrison.

EDWARD PEPEL.

THE LITTLEST REBEL

CHAPTER I

Young Mrs. Herbert Cary picked up her work basket and slowly crossed the grass to a shady bench underneath the trees. She must go on with her task of planning a dress for Virgie. But the prospect of making her daughter something wearable out of the odds and ends of nothing was not a happy one. In fact, she was still poking through her basket and frowning thoughtfully when a childish voice came to her ears.

"Yes, Virgie! Here I am. Out under the trees."

Immediately came a sound of tumultuous feet and Miss Virginia Houston Cary burst upon the scene. She was a tot of seven with sun touched hair and great dark eyes whose witchery made her a piquant little fairy. In spite of her mother's despair over her clothes Virgie was dressed, or at least had been dressed at breakfast time, in a clean white frock, low shoes and white stockings, although all now showed signs of strenuous usage. Clutched to her breast as she ran up to her mother's side was "Susan Jemima," her one beloved possession and her doll. Behind Virgie came Sally Ann, her playmate, a slim, barefooted mulatto girl whose faded, gingham dress hung partly in tatters, halfway between her knees and ankles. In one of Sally Ann's hands, carried like a sword, was a pointed stick; in the other, a long piece of blue wood-moss from which dangled a bit of string.

"Oh, Mother," cried the small daughter of the Carys, as she came up flushed and excited, "what do you reckon Sally Ann and me have been playing out in the woods!"

"What, dear!" and Mrs. Cary's gentle hand went up to lift the hair back from her daughter's dampened forehead.

"*Blue Beard!*" cried Virgie, with rounded eyes.

"Blue Beard!" echoed her mother in astonishment at this childish freak of amusement.

"Not really — on this hot day."

"Um, hum," nodded Virgie emphatically. "You know he—he—he was the terriblest old man that—that ever was. An' he had so many wifses that—"

"Say 'wives,' my darling. *Wives*."

Sally Ann laughed and Virgie frowned.

"Well, I *thought* it was that, but Sally Ann's older'n me and she said 'wifses.'"

"Huh," grunted Sally Ann. "Don' make no differ'nce what you call 'em, des so he had 'em. Gor'n tell her."

"Well, you know, Mother, Blue Beard had such a bad habit of killin' his wives that—that some of the ladies got so they—they almost didn't like to marry him!"

"Gracious, what a state of affairs," cried Mrs. Cary, in well feigned amazement at the timidity of the various Mrs. Blue Beards. "And then—"

"Well, the last time he got married to—to another one—her name was Mrs. Fatima. An'—an' I've been playin' *her*."

"And who played Blue Beard?"

"Sally Ann—an' she's just fine. Come here, Sally Ann, an' let's show her. Kneel down."

Clutching the piece of moss from Sally Ann, Virgie ran behind the girl and put her chubby arms around her neck. "This is his blue beard, Mother. Hold still, Sally Ann—*My lord*, I mean—till I get it tied in the right place."

"Be keerful, Miss Virgie," advised the colored girl. "You's a-ticklin' my nose. I'se gwine to sneeze ef yo' don't, and jes blow my beard all away."

"Oh, don't be such a baby," remonstrated the earnest Miss Virginia, with a correcting slap. "S'pose you were a man an' had to wear one all the time. Now! Stand up! Look, Mother!"

"I'm afraid of him already. He's so ferocious."

"Isn't he? Oh, won't *you* play with us, Mother? I'll—I'll let you be Mrs. Fatima." And then, as her mother's face showed signs of doubt

as to her histrionic ability, "If you were *my* little girl, I'd do it in a minute."

"All right, dear, of course I will; but I've just remembered a bit of lace in your grandmother's trunk in the attic. I believe it will be exactly enough for the neck and sleeves of your new dress." She smiled courageously as she folded a piece of old silk she was re-making. "You and—" she cast a glance at Sally Ann—"your respected brother-in-law can wait a few moments, can't you? You might rehearse a little more. With all this important audience of solemn oaks you wouldn't want to make the slightest slip in your parts."

"That's so," agreed Virgie, raising her hands and clasping her tiny fingers thoughtfully. "And I'll tell you what—we'll mark off the castle walls around the bench where the window's going to be. We ought to have a stage. Come on Sal—I mean Blue Beard, pick up some sticks quick."

Mrs. Cary started, but turned back an instant: "By the way, have either of you seen Uncle Billy. I must find him, too, and plan something for our lunch."

"I seen 'im early dis mawnin'," piped Blue Beard, "makin' for de woods. I reckon he be back pres'n'y."

"Very well," answered Virgie's mother, a shadow creeping into her face as she went on toward the house. Could Uncle Billy possibly be leaving! The most trusted negro of all! No—*never!* She would almost as soon doubt the cause itself!

Three long years ago war had seemed a thrilling, daring necessity. Caught in the dreadful net of circumstance she had vowed proudly in her own heart never to be less brave than the bravest. In her ears still rang the echo of that first ...

Tara-tara!

From far away a faint fanfare of trumpets, borne on brazen wings from the distant clamor of the city's streets.

Tara-tara!

"What's that—a bugle?"

R-r-r-rum-dum!

"And that—a drum?"

Tramp – tramp – tramp—the rolling thunder of ten thousand feet.

War has been declared!

From North to South, the marching lines fill the land—a sea of men whose flashing bayonets glisten and glitter in the morning light. With steady step and even rank, with thrill of brass lunged band and screaming fife the regiments sweep by—in front, the officers on their dancing steeds—behind them, line after line of youthful faces, chins in, chests out, the light of victory already shining in their eyes.

In just this way the Nation's sons went forth to fight in those first brave days of '61. Just so they marched out, defiant, from South and North alike, each side eager for the cause he thought was right, with bright pennons snapping in the breeze and bugles blowing gayly and never a thought in any man's mind but that *his* side would win and his own life be spared.

And every woman, too, waving cheerful farewell to valiant lines of marching gray or sturdy ranks of blue, had hoped the same for *her* side.

But in war there is always a reckoning to pay. Always one contender driven to the wall, his cities turned to ashes, his lands laid waste. Always one depleted side which takes one last desperate stand in the sight of blackened homes and outraged fields and fights on through ever darkening days until the inevitable end is come.

And the end of the Confederacy was now almost in sight. Three years of fighting and the Seceding States had been cut in twain, their armies widely separated by the Union hosts. Advancing and retreating but always fighting, month after month, year after year the men in gray had come at last to the bitterest period of it all—when the weakened South was slowly breaking under the weight of her brother foes—when the two greatest of the armies battled on Virginia soil—battled and passed to their final muster roll.

Of little need to tell of the privations which the pivotal state of the Confederacy went through. If it were true that Virginia had been

simply one vast arsenal where every inhabitant had unfailingly done his part in making war, it was also true that she had furnished many of its greatest battlefields—and at what a frightful cost.

Everywhere were the cruel signs of destruction and want—in scanty larder, patched, refurbished clothing, servantless homes—in dismantled outhouses, broken fences and neglected, brier-choked fields. Even the staples of life were fast diminishing for every man who could shoulder a gun had gone to fight with Lee, and few animals were left and fewer slaves.

Yet, for all the dismal outlook, Winter had passed without actual disaster to the Confederate arms and now that Spring had come the plantation home of the Herbert Carys, twenty miles below Richmond, had never had a fairer setting. White-pillared and stately the old Colonial mansion stood on one of the low, emerald hills which roll back lazily from the peaceful James. It was true that the flower beds had been trampled down to ruin by alien horse and heel, but the scent of the honeysuckle clinging to those shining pillars only seemed the sweeter for the loss, and whatever else the forager might take, he could not rob them of their gracious vista of hills and shimmering river.

Across the broad driveway and up the steps of the veranda passed Mrs. Cary, fairer than had been the flowers, a true daughter of the oldtime South, gentle and quiet eyed, her light summer dress of the cheapest material, yet deftly fashioned by her own fingers from slightly opened neck, where an old brooch lay against her soft throat, down to the dainty spotless flounces lying above her petticoat of crinoline.

Though her lips and eyes refused to betray it even when there was no one to see, it was with a very heavy heart that she mounted the stairs to the attic, thinking, contriving, clutching desperately at her fading hopes.

For good reason the plantation was very silent on this warm spring morning. Where only a year before dozens of soft eyed Jerseys had ranged through the pastures and wood lots there was now no sound of tinkling bells—one after another the fine, blooded stock had been requisitioned by a sad faced quartermaster of the Army of Northern Virginia. And one by one the fat porkers who had muz-

zled greedily among the ears from the Cary bins and who ought to have gone into the smoke house had departed, squealing, to furnish bone and sinew with which to repel the invader. Saddest of all, the chicken coops down by the deserted negro quarters were quite as empty as the once teeming cabins themselves. Poverty, grim and relentless, had caught the Carys in its iron hand and behind Poverty stood its far more frightening shadow—Starvation.

But in these gloomy thoughts she was not entirely alone. All that troubled her and more, though perhaps in a different way, passed hourly through the old gray kinky head of Uncle Billy who happened at this very moment to be emerging stealthily from the woods below the house. Slowly and deliberately he made his way toward the front till he reached a bench where he sat down under a tree to ruminate over the situation and inspect the feathered prize which he had lately acquired by certain, devious means known only to Uncle Billy. Wiping his forehead with his ragged sleeve and holding the bird up by its tied feet he regarded it with the eye of an expert, and the fatigue of one who has been sorely put to it in order to accomplish his purpose.

"It 'pears to me," said Uncle Billy, "dat des' when you needs 'em the mostest the chickens goes to roosting higher 'n' higher. Rooster—I wonder who you b'longs to. Um-um!" he murmured as he thoughtfully sounded the rooster's well developed chest through the feathers. "From de feelin' of you, my son, I 'spec' you was raise' by one er de ol'es' fam'lies what is!"

But Uncle Billy knew the fortunes of the Cary family far too well to mourn over the probable toughness of his booty, and as he rose up from the seat and meandered toward the kitchen, his old, wrinkled face broke into a broad smile of satisfaction over the surprise he had in store. "Well—after I done parbible you, I reckon Miss Hallie be mighty glad to see you. Yas, *seh!*"

But as Uncle Billy walked slowly along beside the hedge which shielded the house on one side he heard a sound which made him halt. A young negro, coming from the rear, had dodged behind the hedge and was trying to keep out of his sight.

"Hi, dar! You, Jeems Henry!" shouted Uncle Billy, instantly suspicious of such maneuvers. "Come heh! Hear *me!* Come heh!"

At this sudden command a young mulatto, hesitating, came through a break in the hedge and stood looking at him, sullen and silent. In his hands he carried a small bundle done up in a colored handkerchief and on this guilty piece of baggage Uncle Billy's eye immediately fastened with an angry frown.

"Whar you gwine?" demanded Uncle Billy, with an accusing finger trembling at the bundle.

The younger man made no reply.

"Hear *me*?" the elder demanded again in rising tones of severity. "Ain't you got no tongue in yo' haid? Whar you gwine?"

Shifting from one foot to the other the younger man finally broke away from Uncle Billy's eye and tried to pass him by.

"Den *I'll* tell you whar you gwine," shouted Uncle Billy, furious at last. "You's runnin' 'way to de Yankees, dat's whar you gwine."

At this too truthful thrust Jeems Henry saw that further deceit would be futile and he faced Uncle Billy with sullen resentment.

"An' s'posin' *I is*—wat den?"

"Den you's a thief," retorted Uncle Billy with dismayingly quick wit. "Dat's what you is—a *thief*."

"*I ain'* no thief," Jeems Henry refuted stubbornly, "*I ain'* stole nothin'."

"You is too," and Uncle Billy's forefinger began to shake in the other's face. "You's stealin' a *nigger!*"

"What dat?" and Jeems Henry's eyes opened wide with amazement. "What you talkin' 'bout?"

"Talkin' 'bout *you*," replied Uncle Billy, sharper than ever. "Dey say a nigger's wuth a thousan' dollars. 'Cose *you* ain't wuth dat much," he said with utter disgust. "I put you down at a dollar and a quarter. But dat ain't de p'int," and he steadily advanced on the other till their faces were only a few inches apart. "It's dis. *You*, Jeems Henry, belongs to Mars' Herbert Cary an' Miss Hallie; an' when you runs 'way you's stealin'. *You's stealin yo'sef!*"

"H'm!" sniffed Jeems Henry, now that the nature and extent of his crime were fully understood. "Ef I ain' wuth but a dollar an' a quarter, I suttently ain' stealin' *much!*"

At this smart reply Uncle Billy's disgust overcame him completely and he tossed the rooster on the ground and clutched Jeems Henry by the arm.

"You mighty right, you ain't!" he shouted. "An' ef I was fo' years younger I'd take it outer yo' hide with a carriage whip. Hol' on dar," as Jeems Henry eluded his grasp and began to move away. "Which way you gwine? You hear me? Now den!"

"I gwine up de river," replied Jeems Henry, badgered at last into revealing his plan. Then, after a cautious look around,—"to Chickahominy Swamp," he added in lower tones.

Uncle Billy cocked his ears. Here was news indeed.

"Chickahominy, huh! So de Yankees is up dar, is dey? An' what you think you gwine to do when you git to 'em?"

"Wuck 'roun de camp," replied Jeems Henry with some vagueness.

"Doin' what?" was the relentless query.

"Blackin' de gent'men's boots—an'—an' gittin' paid fer it," Jeems Henry stammered in reply. "It's better'n being a slave, Unc' Billy," he added as he saw the sneer of contempt on the faithful old man's face. "An' ef you wan' sech a crazy ol' fool, you'd come along wid me, too."

At this combination of temptation and insult Uncle Billy's eyes narrowed with contempt and loathing. "Me?" he said, and a rigid arm pointed back at the house which had been for years his source of shelter and comfort. "Me leave Miss Hallie *now*? Right when she ain't got *nothin'*? Look heah, nigger; dog-gone yo' skin, I got a great min' for to mash yo' mouf. Yas, I *is* a slave. I b'longs to Mars Cary—an' I b'longed to his pa befo' him. Dey feed me and gimme de bes' dey got. Dey take care of me when I'm sick—an' dey take care of me when I'm well—an' I gwine to stay right here. But you? You jes' go on wid de Yankees, an' black der boots. Dey'll free you," and Uncle Billy's voice rose in prophetic tones—"an you'll *keep on* blackin'

boots! Go 'long now, you low-down, dollar-an'-a-quarter nigger!" as Jeems Henry backed away. "Go long wid yo' *Yankee* marsters—and git yo' freedom an' a blackin' brush."

So engrossed were both the actors in this drama that they failed to hear the sound of footsteps on the veranda, and it was so that the mistress of the manor found the would-be runaway and the old slave, glaring into each other's eyes and insulting one another volubly.

Mrs. Cary, with her workbasket on her arm, paused at the top of the steps and regarded the angry pair with well-bred surprise.

"Why, Uncle Billy," she queried, "what is going on here? What is the matter?"

"It's Jeems Henry; dat's what's de matter," said Uncle Billy, in defense of his agitation. "He's runnin' 'way to de Yankees."

Mrs. Cary stopped short for a moment and then came slowly down the steps.

"Oh, James," she said, unbelievably. "Is this really true?"

Jeems Henry hung his head and dug at the gravel with his toe.

"I'm sorry," said Mrs. Cary, and the word held a world of painful thought—of self-accusation, of hopeless regret, of sorrow for one who could be so foolishly misguided. "I'm sorry not only for ourselves but for *you*. You know, I promised Mummy before she died that I would look after you—always."

Still Jeems Henry made no answer and old Uncle Billy saw fit to make a disclosure.

"He's gwine up to Chickahominy." Then to Jeems Henry he added something in low tones which made the young negro's eyes roll wildly with fear. "Dey tells me dat der's *hants* and *ghoses* over dar. I hopes dey'll git you."

"Stop that!" commanded Mrs. Cary. "You know very well, Uncle Billy, there are no such things as ghosts."

"Nor'm I don't, Miss Hallie," responded Uncle Billy, sticking tenaciously to his point, because he could plainly see Jeems Henry wavering. "'Twas jes las' night I hear one—moanin' 'roun' de smoke

house. An' ef I ain't mighty fur wrong, she was smellin' arfter Jeems Henry."

At this wild fabrication, the reason for which she nevertheless appreciated, Mrs. Cary had hard work to hold back a smile, although she promptly reassured the terrified Jeems Henry.

"There now – there – that will do. Nothing of that kind will trouble you, James; you may take my word for it. If you are quite determined to go I shall not try to keep you. But what have you in that bundle?"

"Hi! Hi! Dat's de way to talk!" interrupted Uncle Billy, excitedly foreseeing means to prevent Jeems Henry's departure. "What you got in yo' bundle?"

Jeems Henry lifted his anguished eyes and gazed truthfully at his mistress.

"I ain't got nothin' – what don't b'long to me, Miss Hallie."

"I don't mean that," Mrs. Cary responded kindly. "But you have a long tramp before you. Have you anything to eat?"

"Nor'm, I ain't," and Jeems Henry seemed disturbed.

"Then you'd better come around to the kitchen. We'll see what we can find."

At this unheard-of generosity, Uncle Billy's eyes opened widely and he exploded in remonstrance.

"Now, hol' on dar, Miss Hallie! Hol' on. You ain' got none too much fo' yo'se'f, d'out stuffin' dis yere six-bit rat hole wid waffles an' milasses."

"*William!*" commanded his mistress.

"Yas'm," was the meek response, and Uncle Billy subsided into silence.

With a sigh, Mrs. Cary turned away toward the house. "Well, James, are you coming?"

But Jeems Henry, completely abashed before this miracle of kindness which he did not deserve, decided that it was time for him to be a man.

"Thank you, Miss Hallie," he gulped, "but f'um now on I reckon I gwine take keer of myse'f."

Mrs. Cary, pausing on the bottom step, raised her eyes heavenward in a short prayer that children such as these might somehow be protected from themselves.

"Well, James," she said, when she saw there was nothing more to be done. "I hope you'll be happy and contented. If you are not—come back to us. Perhaps, when the war is over, you'll find things a little more—comfortable. Good-by, James," and she held out her hand.

But this last touch of gentleness was too much for the young mulatto. Although he made an obedient step forward, his feelings overcame him and with an audible snuffle and his hand over his eyes he retreated—then turned his back and plunged through the hedge.

Mrs. Cary sank down on the step and looked as if she, too, would like to cry.

Manfully, Uncle Billy came to her rescue. "Now don't you care, Miss Hallie. He wan' no 'count for plowin' no how."

"Oh, it isn't that, Uncle Billy," Mrs. Cary replied with a low cry of regret. "It isn't the actual loss of help, tho' we need it, goodness knows. But it makes me sad to see them leaving, one by one. They are such children and so helpless—without a master hand."

"Yas'm," agreed Uncle Billy readily. "An' de marster's han' ought to have a hick'ry stick in it fer *dat* nigger. Yas, bless Gawd. But you got *me*, Miss Hallie," he announced proudly. "I ain't runned away to de blue-bellies yet."

"No, you dear old thing," Mrs. Cary cried with laughing relief, and her hand rested on his shoulder in a gentle caress. "I'd as soon think of the skies falling. It is just such faithful friends as you who help me to fight the best."

"Um?" said Uncle Billy promptly, not quite understanding.

"I mean a woman's battles, Uncle Billy—the *waiting* battles—that we fight alone." Mrs. Cary rose to her feet and turned sadly away.

"Yas'm," agreed Uncle Billy. "I dunno what yo' talkin' 'bout but I spec' you's right. Yas'm."

"Dear Uncle Billy," repeated Mrs. Cary, while her eyes filled with tears. "The most truthful – the most *honest* –"

Mrs. Cary stopped and looked sharply at something lying on the ground beside the steps. Then she turned and swept the old man with an accusing glance which made him quail.

"*William!*" she said, in awful tones.

"Yas'm," replied Uncle Billy, feverishly.

"What's *that*?"

Uncle Billy immediately became the very picture of innocence and ignorance. He looked everywhere but at the helpless rooster.

"What's what?" he asked. "Aw, dat? Why – why, dat ain' nothin' 'tall, Miss Hallie. Dat's – dat's des a *rooster*. Yas'm."

Mrs. Cary came down from the steps and looked carefully at the unfamiliar bird. No fear that she would not recognize it if it were hers. "Whose is he?" she asked.

"You – you mean who he b'longs to?" queried Uncle Billy, fencing for time in which to prepare a quasi-truthful reply. "He – he don' b'long to *nobody*. He's his *own* rooster."

"*William!*" commanded Mrs. Cary, severely. "Look at me. *Where* did you get him?"

Here was a situation which Uncle Billy knew must be handled promptly, and he picked up the rooster and made an attempt to escape. "Down on de low grounds – dis mornin'. Dat's right," he said, as he saw dawning unbelief in his mistress' face. "Now you have to skuse me, Miss Hallie. I got my wuck to do."

"One moment, William," interposed Mrs. Cary, completely unconvinced. "You are sure he was on the low grounds?"

"Cose I is!" asseverated Uncle Billy, meanwhile backing farther away.

"What was he doing there?"

Uncle Billy stammered.