

**THE WILLIAM
HENRY LETTERS**

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The William Henry letters by Abby Morton Diaz

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ABBY MORTON DIAZ

**THE WILLIAM
HENRY LETTERS**



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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION.

MY DEAR YOUNG FRIENDS:—

Much to my surprise, I was asked one day if I would be willing to edit the William Henry Letters for publication in a volume.

At first it seemed impossible for me to do anything of the kind; "for," said I, "how can any one edit who is not an editor? Besides, I am not enough used to writing." It was then explained to me that my duties would simply be to collect and arrange the Letters, and furnish any little items concerning William Henry and his home which might interest the reader. It was also hinted, in the mildest manner possible, that I was not chosen for this office on account of my talents, or my learning, or my skill in writing; but wholly because of my intimate acquaintance with the two families at Summer Sweeting place;—for I have at times lived close by them for weeks together; and have taken tea quite often both at Grandmother's and at Aunt Phebe's.

After a brief consideration of the proposal, I agreed to undertake the task; at the same time wishing a more experienced editor could have been found.

My acquaintance with the families commenced just about the time of William Henry's going to school, and in rather a curious way.

I was then (and am now) much interested in the Freedmen. While serving in the Army of the Potomac, I had seen a good deal of them, and was connected with a hospital in Washington at the time when they were pouring into that city, hungry and sick, and half-naked. I belonged to several Freedmen's Societies, and had just then pledged myself to beg a barrelful of old clothing to send South.

But this I found was, for an unmarried man, having few acquaintances in the town, a very rash promise. I had no idea that one barrel could hold so much. The pile of articles collected seemed to me immense. I wondered what I should do with them all. But when packed away there was room left for certainly a third as many more; and I had searched thoroughly the few garrets in which right of search was allowed me. Even in those, I could only get a few other barrel-fuls. A great many garrets were searched during the war; for "Old clo'! old clo'!" was the cry then all over the North.

Now, as I was sitting on by my barrel, wishing it were full, it happened that I looked down into the street, and saw there my *unknown friend*, waiting patiently in his empty cart. This *unknown friend* was a tall, high-shouldered man, who drove in, occasionally, with vegetables. There were others who came in with vegetables also, and oftener than he; but this one I had particularly noticed, partly because of his bright, good-

humored face, and partly because his horse had always a flower, or a sprig of something green, stuck in the harness.

At first I had only glanced at him now and then in the crowd. Then I found myself watching for his blue cart, and next I began to wonder where he came from, and what kind of people his folks were. He joked with the grocery-men, threw apples at the little ragged street children, and coaxed along his old horse in a sort of friendly way that was quite amusing. And though I had never spoken a word to him, nor he to me, I called him my unknown friend, for a sight of him always did me good.

It was a bony old gray horse that he drove, with a long neck poking way ahead; and the man was a farmer-like man, and wore farmer-like clothes; but he had a pleasant, twinkling eye, and the horse, as I said before, was seldom without a flower or bit of green stuck behind his ear or somewhere else about the harness.

And often, when the town was hot and dusty, and business people were mean, I would say to myself, as my friend drove past on his way home, How I should like to ride out with him, no matter where, if 't is only where they have flowers and green things growing in the garden!

On this particular afternoon, as I have said, I observed my friend sitting quietly in his cart. "bound out," as the fishermen say, — sitting becalmed, waiting for something ahead to get started.

It happened that I was just then feeling very sensibly the heat and confinement of the town, and was

more than usually weary of business ways and business people; actually pining for the balmy air of pine woods and the breath of flowery fields. And perhaps, thought I, my friend may live among warm-hearted country folk, who will be delighted to give to my poor contrabands, and whose garrets no barrelman has yet explored!

So, giving a second look, and seeing that he still sat there, patiently awaiting his turn, I ran down, without stopping to think more about it, and asked if I might ride out with him.

"O yes. Jump in! jump in!" said he, in the pleasantest manner possible; then he offered me his cushion, and began to double up an empty bag for himself.

"No, no. Give me the bag," said I; and folding it, I laid it on the board, just to take off the edge of the jolting a little. And my seat seemed a charming one, after having been perched up on an office-stool so long.

That cushion of his took my eye at once. It looked as if it came out of a rocking-chair. The covering was of black cloth, worked in a very old-fashioned way, with pinks and tulips. The colors were faded, but it had a homespun, comfortable, countrified look; in fact, the first glance at that queer old cushion assured me that I was going to exactly the right place.

Presently we got started, and certainly I never had a better ride, nor one with a pleasanter companion. He asked me all sorts of funny questions about electricity, and oxygen, and flying-machines, and the telegraph, and the moon and stars.

"Now you are a learned man, I suppose," said he; "and I want you to tell me how that golden-rod gets its

yellow out of black ground." I said I was not a learned man at all, and I did n't believe learned men themselves could tell how it got its yellow, and the asters their purple, and the succory its blue, and the everlasting its white, all out of the same black ground. He said he was pretty sure his wife could n't boil up a kettleful and color either of those colors from them.

So we went talking on. He asked me where I'd been stopping, and what I did for a living. And I told him what I did for a living, and all about soldier life, and the contrabands, and about my barrel. Our road led through woods part of the way, and I drew in long breaths of woody air. He told me a funny woodchuck story, and had a good deal to say about wood-lots, — how some rich men formerly owned great tracts, but becoming poor were forced to sell; and how, when pines were cut off, oaks grew up in their place. And among other things he told me that a hardhack would turn into a buckleberry-bush. I said that seemed like a miracle. He was going on to tell me about one that he had watched, but just then we turned into a pleasant, shady lane.

We had n't gone far down this shady lane before we heard a loud screaming behind us, and looking round saw a small boy caught fast in the bushes by the skirt of his frock.

"Do you see that little boy?" I asked.

"O yes, I see him," he said, laughing. "Hullo, Tommy! what you staying there for?"

The boy kept on crying.

"What you waiting for?" he called out again, just as if he could n't see that the bushes would not let the child stir.