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Christmas in Dixie
The hunting experience was part and parcel of the holiday season at Hampton, and
the quest rightly holds preeminence in the contents of this anthology. Nonetheless
Rutledge was closely attuned to the wider meaning of the season. He delighted in
the simple joys of sharing and giving, not merely with his immediate family but
with neighbors and, especially, the black residents on the plantation. A great lover
of tradition, Old Flintlock looked back with longing to Christmases past, and in the
selections offered here the reader gets a solid feel for the manner in which he cher-
ished the way the Rutledge clan had celebrated the season over the generations.

The opening selection, a chapter from the little book in which he paid warm
tribute to his parents, My Colonel and His Lady, especially evokes an easygoing
world of gentility and graciousness we have largely lost. Indeed the same can be said
of much that Rutledge wrote, and for me at least, therein lies much of the enduring
appeal of his work. He vicariously takes his reader to old plantation days and long-
lost ways with an unerring compass pointing straight to the human heart. At no
time of the year does life hold more romance, more meaning, and a greater sense of
spirituality than at Yuletide. Rutledge knew this, and better still, he was able to cap-
ture in words what most of us feel but find difficult to express.

Sixty years after the fact, his youngest son, Irvine, captured much of the excite-
ment and sense of anticipation that underlay the family’s return to Hampton
Plantation in a short piece he wrote entitled “My Father Takes the Whole Family to
Hampton for Christmas.” It comes from a little booklet, Tales of Hampton, he self-
published in 1987 and presented to family members and a few others. His recollec-
tions merit sharing in full as an introduction to the Christmas in Dixie that was an
integral and important part of the family’s existence for so many years.

My earliest memory of going to Hampton goes back to the time
when I was five, which puts it in December of 1917. My brother Arch
was nine and my brother Mid was seven. Early in October my father,
who was teaching at Mercersburg Academy in southern Pennsylvania,
announced that he was taking the whole family to his old home for
the Christmas holidays. It was before the family had a car and the trip
was no minor undertaking.
The excitement of the announcement increased in November, and by December we could hardly wait for the day of departure. For at least a week beforehand Mother and Dad had worked every minute to get ready. The three-week trip for five people required all of the advance planning that my parents could give to it. The day of departure arrived and the five of us, with considerable luggage, boarded the train in Mercersburg. In twenty minutes we changed trains in Marion, Pennsylvania, and in another twenty minutes we were in Hagerstown, Maryland. There we boarded a Baltimore and Ohio train that took us through Weverton on the Potomac River and into the Union Station in Washington, which was, I felt sure, the biggest building in the world. The great high ceiling echoed every sound in it, especially when a train caller began to call the trains. He was a large man with a large voice. His “call” lasted for five minutes or more and he ended with a dramatic flourish, his voice growing especially melodious with “Atlantic Coast Line going South.”

We boarded our fourth train, the Atlantic Coast Line, and my father soon herded us into the dining car where shining white table cloths and waiters in white uniforms made an impressive appearance. We sat down to a sumptuous meal, the train got under way, and soon the lights outside began to zip by faster and faster. My father’s spirits were rising each mile of the way. After dinner we were permitted to stay up until after we had passed Richmond, the strategic point at which my father was at last certain that we were safely on our way.

The phrase, “South of Richmond,” was a poem in itself for my father. A book of poems he wrote that was published in 1923 was called *South of Richmond*. In it he wrote:

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\begin{align*}
\text{South of Richmond roars the train;} \\
\text{Subtly o’er my weary brain} \\
\text{Dread delicious languor steals;} \\
\text{Peace my tired spirit heals.} \\
\text{From the struggle of the mart,} \\
\text{Hurrying to the homeland’s heart,} \\
\text{Through the deepening night I glide} \\
\text{Into dreamlands sweet and wide.}
\end{align*}
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When we awakened, a different world greeted me. Instead of ice and snow, we saw wide broom grass fields running back to tall longleaf pines. Cottonfields vied with fields of tobacco, and the trees in the watercourses were festooned with Spanish moss and crowned with bunches of mistletoe.
Arriving in Charleston, we barely had time to eat breakfast and be transported by my Uncle Tom to a dock where the ferryboat *Sappho* awaited us. It was, at that time, I am sure, in its declining years. It carried about six cars per trip. When a car drove onto it, the *Sappho* tilted somewhat fearsomely, but the balancing of it was a marvel. We could see in its hold three giant Negroes, each controlling a large barrel of sand, who effortlessly rolled the barrels to counteract the tilting. Even in midstream my brothers and I watched in fascination as a delicate balance was kept by a gentle rolling of the barrels. After a forty-five minute trip we reached the town of Mt. Pleasant where, waiting with a fine horse and carriage, was my grandfather, Colonel Henry Middleton Rutledge. He seemed quite ancient, but I was five and he was seventy-seven.

The journey from Mt. Pleasant to Hampton was just over forty miles. As I slept most of the time, I recall little of the long ride, except I recall my parents’ mentioning the Sixteen Mile House and the Thirty-two Mile House as we passed. Once a flock of wild turkeys crossed the road, and I remember a great hurrying to get guns loaded but not in time to get a shot. I often dozed off when the Colonel was regaling Dad with stories of deer hunts and awakened when still other stories were being told.

It was twilight when we at last saw the lights of Hampton. My grandmother greeted us with a venison, sweet potato, and rice supper, fell on my father’s neck, and between kisses called him “Benjamin.” (It was explained to me that it was because he was her youngest son.)

The next morning we three boys were turned over to three Negro boys our own age, Prince, Will, and Samuel, for a tour of the grounds and the livestock. They were sternly directed by my father and theirs not to let us tease the plantation bull, climb any tall trees, or wander into the woods with which we were not yet familiar.

The memory is unusually clear and vivid. Perhaps it is because I was very young and all the world was new and strange and beautiful and exciting.