

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

An' you know, w'en a lady is dancing on a table, after a good supper, of co'se every glass is a temptation to her slipper. An' slippers an' wine-glasses—well, to say de least, de combination it is disastrous.

“So, I say, de floor it is good enough for me. It seem more *comme il faut*.

“*Mais* come along. We will be late.”

PART SECOND

PART SECOND

I

“Sing, nigger, sing! Sing yo’ rhyme!
De waters is a-floodin’—dey ’s a-roarin’ on
time!
Climb, squirrel, climb!”

FOR several miles, when the night
was still or the wind favorable, one
could follow the song, accented by simul-
taneous blows of implements of defense
marking the measure.

“Sing, nigger, sing! Sing an’ pray!
O! Death is on de water—he ’s a-ridin’ dis
way!
Pray, nigger, pray!”

Some of the words might have been
elusive had they been unfamiliar, but
the annual agitation kept the songs of
the river in mind; and even in safe sec-
tions, where many sat in peace beside

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the rising waters, they would take their pipes from their lips to catch up the danger-songs and sympathetically pass them along. Many a prayer went with them, too, from humble petitioners who knew whereof they prayed.

Such were an old black couple who sat one night upon the brow of the outer levee at Carrollton, since become an upper district of far-reaching New Orleans.

In strong contrast to the stirring scenes enacting below the city, all was peace and tranquillity here. A strong, new embankment, securely built several hundred feet inland, had some years before supplanted the outer levee, condemned as insecure, so that the white inhabitants of the suburb slept, intelligently safe behind a double barrier, for the condemned bank had stood the stress of so many seasons that much of the low land lying between the two levees was finally occupied by squatters, mostly negroes, this being free space, taking no rent of such as did not fear

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the ever-impending mortgage which the river held.

Of this class, quite apart from others, might have been seen almost any evening the old couple, Hannah and Israel, sitting upon the brow of the levee near the door of their low cabin, while, always within call, there played about them a fair-haired little girl and a dog.

When the beautiful child, followed by the dog, a fine Irish setter, would suddenly emerge in a chase from among the woodpiles about the cabin, there was a certain high-bred distinction in them both which set them apart from the rest of the picture.

Sometimes they would "play too hearty," as Mammy expressed it, and she would call: "Dat 'il do now, Blossom! Come lay down, Blucher!" and, followed closely by the dog, the child would coddle at the knees of the woman, who "made the time pass" with stories. Sometimes these would be folk-tales brought over from Africa, or reminiscences of plantation life, but more often,

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feeling her religious responsibility to the little one, old Hannah would repeat such Bible stories as "befitted a child's mind," such as "Ab'um an' Isaac," "Eden's Gyarden," or "De Prodigum Son."

Of them all, the Eden story was easily favorite, its salient mystery features affording fine scope for the narrator's power, while they held the imaginative child with the spell of all good wonder-tales. We get these stories so young and grow up with them so familiarly that when we finally come into a realization of them they hold no possible surprise and so their first charm is lost. Think of one story with such elements as a wonder-woman rising from a man's side while he slept—a talking serpent, persuasive in temptation as insidious in easy approaches—a flaming sword of wrath—a tree of knowledge—and the sounding voice of God as he walked through the garden "in the cool of the day"! Is not a single colloquialism of so venerable ancestry sufficient to dignify a language?

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Herself a classic in that she expressed the eternal quality of maternal love incarnate, the old woman thus unconsciously passed along to the object of her devotion the best classic lore of the ages. And sunrise and sunset, star- and moon-land, and their reflection in the great water-mirror, were hers and the child's, without the asking. Nor were they lost, although to both child and woman they were only common elements in life's great benediction.

During the story-telling, which generally lasted until the sun sank across the river, but while its last rays still made "pictures of glory in the heavens" with the water's reflection,—pictures which served to illustrate many a narration, to inspire the speaker and impress a sensitive child,—the dog would stretch himself facing the two, and his intelligent and quizzical expression would sometimes make Mammy laugh in a serious place or change the drift of her story. Often, indeed, this had happened in the telling of certain animal

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tales which Mammy declared Blucher knew better than she and she even insisted that he occasionally winked at her and set her right when she went wrong.

In the early dusk, the old man Israel would come trudging in from the water and sometimes he would light his pipe and join Mammy's audience.

Occasionally Mammy would cook the supper in the open, upon a small charcoal furnace, and the "little Miss" would sup from a tiny low table brought from the cabin. Here she was served by the old people in turn, for they never ate until she had finished. Then the little girl was carefully undressed and sung to sleep with one of Mammy's velvet lullabies, in a dainty bed all her own, a berth which hung, shelf-like, against the wall; for the home of this incongruous family was quite as novel as the family itself.

Part of the ladies' cabin of an old Mississippi steamboat, still shabbily fine in white paint and dingy gilding, which Israel had reclaimed from an aban-

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doned wreck, formed a wing of the building. This, which, with its furnishings, Mammy called "Blossom's lay-out," communicated by a door with a "lean-to" of weather-stained boards, whose mud chimney and homely front formed a strong contrast to the river entrance of white and gold. This grotesque architectural composite would have attracted attention at another time or place, but as one of a class, made to its need of any available material, it passed unnoticed beyond an occasional casual smile of amusement and sympathy.

It was like the composite toilets of the poor blacks during the hard times suggestively called the "reconstruction period," when old women in soldier coats and boots, topped by third-hand feathered finery, waited at the distributing-station for free rations. No one ever thought of laughing at these pathetic grotesques, technically freed but newly enslaved by bitter circumstance.

On the night with which this tale begins, when Mammy had put Blossom

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to sleep and tucked the mosquito-bar snugly around her, she went back to her place beside her husband, and, lighting her pipe, sat for a long time silent. This was so unusual that presently Israel said:

"What de matter wid you dis evenin', Hannah? Huccome you ain't a-talkin'?"

Hannah did not answer immediately. But after a time she said slowly:

"I 's jes a-speculatin', Isrul—jes speculatin'." And, after another pause, she added, quite irrelevantly:

"Is you got yo' swimp-sacks all set?"

"In co'se I is." Israel's words came through a cloud of smoke.

"An' yo' oars brung in?"

"In co'se I is!"

"An' de skift locked?"

"In co'se I is!"

"An' Blucher fed?"

"What 's de matter wid you, Hannah? You reckon I gwine forgit my reg'lar business?"

The old woman smoked in silence for some minutes. Then she said:

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"Isrul!"

"What you want, Hannah?"

"I say, Isrul, I got some'h'n' on my mind. Hit 's been on my mind more 'n a yeah, an' hit 's a-gittin' wuss."

"What is it, Hannah?"

"You an' me we 's growin' ole, Isrul—ain't dat so?"

"Yas, Hannah."

"An' we ain't got long to stay heah, hey, Isrul?"

"Yas, ol' 'oman—can't dispute dat."

"An'"—hesitatingly. "You knows what 's on my mind, Isrul!"

"Hit 's on my mind, too, Hannah. You don't need to 'spress yo'se'f. Hit 's on my mind, day an' night."

"What 's on yo' mind, Isrul?"

The old man began stirring the bowl of his pipe absently.

"'Bout we gittin' ol', Hannah, an' maybe some day we 'll drap off an' leave Marse Harol's chile all by she se'f, like de chillen in de wilderness."

"What mek you mek me say it, Hannah? You knows what 'sponsibility

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Gord done laid on we two. Ain't we done talked it over a hond'ed times 'fo' now?"

"Dat ain't *all* what 's on my mind, Isrul."

"What else is you got to fret yo'se'f about, Hannah? Ain't I mekin' you a good livin'? Ain't you had de money to put a new little silk frock away every yeah for de Blossom, and ain't dey all folded away, one a-top de yether, 'g'instant de answer to our prayers, so her daddy 'll see her dressed to her station when he comes sudden? Ain't you got a one-way-silk alapaca frock an' a good bonnet for yo'se'f to tek de chile by de han' wid—when Gord see fitten to answer us? You ain't *hungry*—or *col'*, is yer?"

"G' way, Isrul! Who 's studyin' about victuals or clo'es! I 's p'onderin' about de chile, dat 's all. 'T ain't on'y 'bout we gittin' ol'. *She 's gittin' tall.* An' you know, Isrul, you an' me we ain't fitten to raise Marse Harol's chile. She 's big enough to study quality man-

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ners an' white behavior. All Marse Harol's fam'ly's chillen knowed all de fancy high steps an' played scales on de pianner wid bofe hands at once-t, time dey was tall as Blossom is—an' dey made dancin'-school curtsies, too. I taken notice, Blossom is sort o' shy, an' she gittin' so she 'll stand off when anybody speaks to her. Dis heah cabin on de river-bank ain't no place for my white folks. I sho' is pestered to see her gittin' shy an' shamefaced—like po' folks. Modest manners and upright behavior is her portion. I *know* it by heart, but I can't *show* it to her—I know it by knowledge, but of co'se I can't perform it; an' it frets me."

"Hannah!"

"What is it, Isrul?"

"Who gi'n us dis 'sponsibility? Is we axed for it?"

"No, Isrul, we ain't axed for it."

"Ain't you an' me promised Mis' Agnes, de day she died, to keep his chile, safe-t an' sound, tell Marse Harol' come?"

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"Dat 's six yeahs past, dis comin' Christmus, Isrul. I b'lieve Marse Harol' done dead an' gone."

"Huccome you believe he dead? Is he come to you in de sperit?"

"No, he ain't come, an' dat 's huccome hope stays wid me. If he was free in de sperit lan' he sho' would come an' gimme a sign. But reason is reason, an' ef he *ain't* dead, huccome he don't come an' look arter his chile? My white folks warn't nuver shirkers—nor deserters. So, when I stays off my knees awhile an' casts away faith in de unseen, seem dat my horse-sense hit gives me trouble. An' den, like to-night, somehow my courage sinks, an' look like I kin see him dead an' forgot in some ol' ditch on de battle-field.

"Jes *s'posin'* dat 's de trufe, Isrul, what we boun' to do wid Blossom?"

"Hannah!"

"Yas, Isrul."

"You done heard a plenty o' preachin', ain't yer?"

"Yas, Isrul."

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"Is you ever heared a preacher preach 'bout *s'posin'*?"

"No, Isrul."

"But I tell you what you *is* hearn 'em preach about. You hearn 'em preach about *watchin'* an' *prayin'*."

"Dat 's so, Isrul, but yit'n still, you know de scripture say 'Hope referred meketh de heart sick.' You ricollec' dat, don't you?"

"Yas, but dat 's a side-track. Dat ain't got nothin' to do wid answer to prayer. Dat 's jes to give comfort to weary souls, when de waitin'-time is long; dat 's all. Dey may git sick at heart—jes' waitin'."

"You right, Isrul."

"Well, an' arter watchin' an' prayin', dey 's one mo' thing needful. An' dat 's *faith*.

"Ef we *watches* for Marse Harol' to come, an' *prays* for 'im to come, an' don't *trus'*, you reckon Gord gwine to bother wid us?"

"I *tries* to trus', Isrul, an' mos' days I does look for Marse Harol'. Many 's

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de time I done taken Blossom by de hand an' walked along de levee an' looked down in de Ca'ollton gyarden while de ban' played, an' jes fairly scroochinized my ol' eyes out, hopin' to reconnize 'im in de dance. I 'm dat big a fool in faith—I sho' is. An' I tries de best I kin to keep my faith warm, so de good Lord 'll see it glowin' like a live coal in my heart an' he 'll 'member hisse'f about de chile an' sen' 'er daddy home, *sen' 'er daddy home!* My Gord, I say, *SEN' 'ER DADDY HOME!* I tries continu'sly, Isrul."

"You must n't talk about tryin', Hannah. You mus' jes b'lieve it, same as a little chile—same like you see it; an' den you does see it. An' when you git along so fur dat you *sees* wid de neye o' faith, Gord 'll sho' mek yo' faith good. Ef faith kin h'ist a mountain an' shove it along, hit can fetch a man home whar he b'longs; an' hit 'll do it, too."

"Isrul!"

"What is it, Hannah?"

"Gord ain't nuver *promised* to sen' Marse Harol' home, as I knows on."

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"He 's promised to answer de prayer o' faith, ain't He?"

"Yas, Isrul, dat 's so. Pray Him to strenken my faith, ol' man. You stays so much on de water wid de sky in yo' eyes, whilst I works 'mongst de wood-piles, so close to de yearth—seem like maybe you mought git nigher to Gord 'n what I 'm enabled to do. Pickin' up chips, hit 's lowly work an' hit keeps yo' face down, an'—"

"Don't say dat, ol' 'oman! Use yo' fo'sight an' 'stid o' you seein' *chips* you 'll see *kindlin'-wood*. Dat what dey is. Dey 'll lead yo' heart upward dat-a-way. Heap o' folks don't see nothin' but money in de river—money an' mud; an' dey don't know it 's a merror sometimes, full o' stars an' glory. I done read Gord's rainbow promises on de face o' dat muddy river more 'n once-t, when I lifted out my swimp-nets on a still mornin' whilst de sun an' de mist consulted together to show a mericle to a ol' dim-eyed nigger."

"You sho' does help me when you

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'splains it all out dat-a-way, Isrul. Pray like a gordly man, ol' pardner, an' yo' ol' 'oman she gwine talk faith strong as she kin—widout turnin' hycoprite."

"Dat 's right, honey—ol' 'oman—dat 's right. *You* pray an' *I 'll* pray—an' we 'll *watch* wid *faith*. An' ef Gord don't sen' Marse Harol', He 'll git a message to us some way, so we 'll be guided."

The sound of a horn from across the river put an end to the conversation. Some one was blowing for the ferryman.

"PITY you tied *Wood-duck* up so soon to-night," said the old wife, following Israel with her eyes as she spoke, while he rose slowly and taking the oars down from the rafters started to the river.

In a moment the old man's answering horn sounded clear and loud in response, and the clank of the chain as it dropped in the bow of the skiff, followed by the rhythmic sound of the oar-locks, told his listening mate that the ferryman was on his way.

II

BESIDES plying the ferry-skiff at which Israel earned odd dimes—every day a few—he turned many an honest penny with his shrimp-nets.

The rafts of logs chained together at the landing were his, and constituted the initial station of a driftwood industry which was finally expressed in the long piles of wood which lay stacked in cord measures on either side of the cabin.

The low and prolonged talk of the old people to-night had been exceptional only in its intensity. The woman's reluctant almost despair of a forlorn hope was pathetic indeed. Still it was but momentary. They had gone over the same ground many times before, and fear and even foreboding had occasionally clouded their vision in reviewing the situation.

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she felt the near presence of the dog on guard at her skirts' hem, her conscious thoughts were far away.

Quickly even as lightning darts, zig-zagging a path of light from one remote point to another in its eccentric course — her dim eyes actually resting upon the night skies where the lightnings play — she traveled again in her musings the arbitrary paths of fate from one crisis to another in the eventful latter years of her life. Then she would seem to see clear spaces, and again the bolts of misfortune which presaged the storm of sorrow out of which had come her present life.

First in the anxious retrospect there was the early break in the family when the boys began going away to college; then the sudden marriage of the youngest of the three; the declaration of war; the enlistment of the two elder students in the voluntary service which had transferred their names from the university roster to the list of martyrs.

Another dart as of lightning, and she

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saw this youngest come home with his fair New England bride, to depart with her and Israel for an island home beyond the canebrakes, and on the heel of this divided joy came his passionate enlisting "to avenge the death of his brothers." And then—ah! and then—how fast the zigzags dart! Rapid changes everywhere traced in fire, and, as memory recalled them, throughout the whole was ever the rolling thunder of artillery, completing the figure.

The story is one of thousands, individualized, of course, each, by special incidents and personalities, but the same, every one, in its history of faithfulness of the slave people during the crucial period when the masters had gone to battle, leaving their wives and babies in the care of those whose single chance of freedom depended on the defeat of the absent.

Hannah and Israel had been loved and trusted servants in the family of old Colonel Le Duc. The woman had nursed all the babies in turn, Harold being the

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last, and hence her own particular "baby" for all time.

BRAKE ISLAND, so called because of its situation in a dense cane-brake, which was at once a menace and a guard, was the most unpopular part of the colonel's large estate, albeit there was no land so rich as its fields, no wood better stocked with game than the narrow forest lying close along its northern limit, no streams more picturesque in their windings or better equipped for the angler's art than that of the Bayou d'Iris, whose purple banks declared the spring while the robins were calling, and before the young mocking-birds in the crape myrtles opened their great red mouths for the wriggling song-food of the bayou's brim.

All the Le Duc sons had loved to go to the island to shoot and to fish while they were lads, but upon attaining the social age they had grown to despise it for its loneliness. The brake which fringed its borders had long been a ref-

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uge for runaway negroes, who were often forced to poach upon its preserves for food, even to the extent of an occasional raid upon its smoke-houses and barns, so that women and children were wont to shudder at the very idea of living there. Still it had always been the declared "favorite spot on earth" to the colonel, who had often vowed that no son of his should own it and spurn it.

He lived like a lord himself, it is true, on a broader place of less beauty on the bank of the great river,—“keeping one foot in New Orleans and one on the plantation,” as he expressed it,—and it is not surprising that his children had laughingly protested against being brought up on house-parties and the opera as preparation for a hermit's life, even in “Paradise.”

All excepting Harold. While the brothers had protested against the island home, he had said little, but when he had brought his bride home, and realized the scant affection that stirred the hearts of his family at sight

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of her placid New England face, even while he himself suffered much, knowing that her brothers were enlisting in the opposing armies and that her family felt her marriage at this time to a slaveholder as a poignant sorrow—while the father seemed hesitating as to just what paternal provision he should make for his impulsive boy, the boy himself, in a sudden towering declaration of his manhood and of resentment and pride, turned upon him:

“Give us Brake Island and Mammy and Israel, and cut us loose! And I’ll show my people a new variety of hermit life!”

The thing was quickly done. A deed of gift made on the spot conveyed this Eden of modern times, with its improvements, full working force and equipment, to Harold Guyoso Le Duc, who in accepting it assumed the one condition of making it his home.

III

HAROLD was a brilliant fellow, impulsive and extravagant as he was handsome and loving, and he had no sooner taken possession of his Eden than he began to plan, by means of a system of engineering, to open it up by a canal which should “span the brake and tap the bayou,” so that boats of size and circumstance might enter. Here he would have a launch and a barge, and the great world of culture, of wit, of pleasure, and of affluence should come in splendor “to watch a hermit herm,” or, as he as often put it, “to help a hummit hum.”

A great house-party was quickly arranged—a party of gay friends, engineers chiefly, bidden for a freely declared purpose—a party which is still cherished in the annals of local social history as a typical example of affluent