

## THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

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

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ante-bellum hospitality, and is even yet personally recalled by a few old men who sit and seem to wait, mostly, in shabby clothing incongruously ill fitting their gilded reminiscence, at certain dozing business resorts in old New Orleans.

Most of these venerables still live in their shabby ancestral homes, although it may be their women take boarders or their best rooms are let for business purposes—cleared of their cumbersome furnishings of mahogany and rosewood by the rising waters of misfortune which have gradually carried them into the “antique-shops” of the vicinity.

A place of honor on the tax-lists and a waiting palace of white marble in the cemetery—these querulous witnesses to distinction and of permanency are in some cases the sole survivors of the many changes incident upon a reconstruction.

To these gentle reminiscers the “Brake Island house-party of Harold Le Duc” is even yet the Procrustean bed against which they measure all the

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ostentatious pageantry of a new and despised social order.

For the possible preservation of a bit of local color—gone out in the changed light of a new dispensation—behold a hasty sketch of this long-ago play-time. The invitations which were sent out, naming a single date only, with the flattering implication that the visit so urgently desired might never come to an end,—one of the easy fashions of the old régime,—promptly brought a dozen men, with as many women, wives and sweethearts, to the “big house” beyond the swamp.

This Southern home, which was broadly typical of its class, simple enough in its architecture in that its available space, barring the watch-tower in the center of its roof, was all upon a single floor and its material the indigenous woods of the forest, yet suffered no diminution in being called the “big house”—a name which has been made to serve many a lesser structure for purposes of distinction.

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Set high upon brick pillars,—there are no cellars possible in the Mississippi valley country,—its low, spreading form graced the easy eminence upon which it stood, dominating its wide demesne with a quiet dignity superior to that of many a statelier home.

In design it was a Greek cross. Surrounded on all sides by deep balconies, ornate with cornice and Corinthian columns, its four arms afforded as many entrances, of which the southern portal was formal front, from which an avenue of arbor-vitæ led down to the canopied landing at the bayou's bank at the foot of the decline.

The house had been designed and built by Harold's father, in an exuberance of youthful enthusiasm, upon his early marriage. He it was who had planted the trailing roses and wistaria-vines, whose gnarled trunks, now woody and strong as trees, topped the balconies, throwing profusions of bloom down their pillars and along their balustrades. Here Lamarque, Solfaterre, Cloth-of-

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gold, Musk-cluster, Lady-bank, Multiflora—all the cherished climbing roses of an earlier period—mingled in harmonious relations with honeysuckle, woodbine, and clematis.

The most beautiful of them all, the single yellow-centered Cherokee rose of the soil,—good enough in itself for anywhere, but ostracized through caste exclusion from distinction of place about the home,—lay in heavy tangles in the tall, impenetrable hedges which bounded the garden on three sides meeting the bayou at the base of the knoll.

Within its inclosure a resident colony of choice flowers—exotics mainly, but domiciled and grown hardy in this protected spot—had waxed riotous in the license of years of neglect, and throwing off traditions, as many another aristocrat in like circumstances has done before, appeared now in novel forms developed in life's open race with children of the soil.

Here in season were great trees of camellia, white and red, with each a

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thousand waxen blooms, stalwart woody growths of lemon-verbena, topping sweet olives and answering the challenge of the stately oleanders, which, in turn, measured heads against the magnolias' shoulders.

Appropriating any available support, great scarlet geraniums ten feet high, knowing no winters, laid hands upon the trellises and matched pennies with the locust blooms, red petal against white, affiliating, weak-spined as they were, with scrub-trees which counted real trees at least in their Louisiana pedigrees.

"Cape jasmine borders" had risen into hedges, fencing in certain beds, while the violets, which originally guarded fantastic forms in outline, had gregariously spread into perennial patches of green and purple.

And everywhere there were orange-trees—not a grove here, but always one or more in the range of vision. Their breath was over the garden, and even the bees in the locust-trees, with all their

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fuss and scattering of honey sweets, could not dispel their all-pervading suggestion of romance—the romance of life incarnate ever expressed in their peerless exhibits of flower, fresh fruit and yellow, all growing together upon a maternal tree rich in life and tone.

Too many words about an old garden? Perhaps so, and yet—

The spirit of a venerable garden as it rises and shows itself to memory is such a benediction that one seeing the vision may sometimes wonder if, if *life, per se*, be eternal, and the resurrection of *certain* so-called "dead" a *fact*, we may not some day wander again in the risen gardens of our childhood, recognizing them by verification of certain familiar faces of flowers who may know us in turn and bloom again—taking up life, which ever includes love and immortality, at the point of suspension, as a mother, waking from a nap, goes back to her window, and catching up her broken song held in the cobwebs of sleep, sings it through,

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while she finishes a little sleeve, her foot again upon the cradle at her side.

Life is the great serial—one chapter printed here, another there—a seemingly finished comedy crowding a tragedy unrelated, yonder.

The discerning artist who, reading as he runs, brings these parts into line will have begun the great book. Until Gabriel wills, it may not be finished.

## IV

IT was, no doubt, but natural that the man of the world, who had deserted such an Eden of his own designing for the ostensible excuse of business convenience, should have resented in his sons their inherited repugnance to the retired life.

What more formidable combatant than one's own stubbornness, turned to confront him, in his children?

The broken trip from New Orleans to the Island took nearly two days, although the crow does it easily in a few hours.

The initial munificence of chartering one of the great Mississippi steamboats for the first stage of the journey set the pace for the entire occasion. Host and hostess met their guests at the river landing with carriages and cane

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wagons gaily bedecked with evergreens, mosses, and dogwood branches in flower, and a merry drive through several miles of forest brought them to the banks of the bayou, where a line of rowboats awaited them.

The negro boatmen, two to man each skiff, wearing jumpers of the Harvard crimson, stood uncovered in line at the bayou's edge, and as the party alighted, they served black coffee from a fire in the open.

The negro with a cup of coffee his own hue and clear as wine is ever an ubiquitous combination in the Louisiana lowlands. He bobs up so unexpectedly in strange places balancing his tiny tray upon his hand, that a guest soon begins to look for him almost anywhere after an interval of about three dry hours, and with a fair chance of not being disappointed.

When finally the party had embarked, the hostess riding in the first boat with the governor of the State, while Harold

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brought up the rear with the governor's lady, the sun was low in the west, and narrow search-lights, piercing the wood for a brief moment, revealed a great wonder-world of dank growths so fairly alive with creeping, flying, darting things—chirping, calling, singing, croaking, humming, and hooting—that when in a twinkling the light suddenly went out, many of the women shuddered with a shrinking sense of the uncanny.

Before this intangible emotion had time to crystallize into fear, however, each pilot who manipulated the rudder astern had drawn from under his seat a great torch of pine and set it ablaze.

Under festoons of gray Spanish moss, often swung so low that heads and torches were obliged to defer to them, and between flowering banks which seemed sometimes almost to meet in the floating growths which the dividing bows of the boats plowed under, the little crafts sped lightly along.

Occasionally a heavy plunging thing would strike the water with a thud, so

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near a boat that a girlish shriek would pierce the wood, spending itself in laughter. A lazy alligator, sleepily enjoying a lily-pool, might have been startled by the light, or a line of turtles, clinging like knots to a log over the water, suddenly let go.

Streaks of darting incandescence marked the eccentric flights of a million fireflies flecking the deep wood whose darkness they failed to dispel; and once or twice two reflected lights a few inches apart, suggesting a deer in hiding, increased the tremulous interest of this super-safe but most exciting journey.

But presently, before impressions had time to repeat themselves, and objects dimly discerned to become familiar, a voice from the leading boat started a song.

It was a great voice, vibrant, strong, and soft as velvet, and when presently it was augmented by another, insidiously thrown in, then another in the next boat, until all the untutored Harvard oarsmen were bravely singing and

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the dipping oars fell into the easy measure, all sense of fear or place was lost in the great uplift of the rhythmic melody.

At special turns through the wood ringing echoes gave back the strains. A mocking-bird, excited by the unusual noise, poured forth a rival disputatious song, and an owl hooted, and something barked like a fox; but it was the great singing of the men which filled the wood.

Common songs of the plantation followed one another—songs of love, of night and bats, of devils and hobgoblins, selected according to the will of the leader—all excepting the opening song, which, although of the same repertoire, was “by request,” and for obvious reasons.

It was called “When de Sun Swings Low,” and ran something like this:

Look out for Mister Swaller when de sun  
swings low—

Watch him swoop an' sway!  
He keeps a mighty dippin', like he don' know  
whar to go,

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A-saggin' every way.  
He starts sort o' nimbly,  
But he settles mighty wimbly  
When he scurries for de chimbley  
When de sun swings low.

Does you see a cloud a-risin' when de sun  
swings low?

Listen ef it sings.

Hit 's a swarm o' gray muskitties, 'bout a  
million strong or so,

A-sharpenin' up der stings.  
Dey keeps a mighty filin',  
An' dey tries to sing beguillin',  
But de 'skitties' song is rilin'  
When de sun swings low.

Oh, de woods is all conversin' when de sun  
swings low—

Bird an' beast an' tree;

Dey all communes together in de languages  
dey know,

An' sperits rise to see.  
De nightmares prances,  
An' de will-o'-wisp dances,  
When de moonlight advances  
An' de sun swings low.

But most naïve and characteristic of  
them all perhaps was "Ole Marse  
Adam."

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Ole Mister Devil took a walk in Paradise—  
Lady Mis' Eve she 's a-walkin', too—  
Hoped to meet Mars' Adam, she was steppin'  
mighty nice—  
Lady Mis' Eve she 's a-walkin', too.

Dis was 'fo' de fig-time, so my lady picked a  
rose—

Lady Mis' Eve she 's a-walkin', too—  
An' she helt it 'g'inst de sunlight, as she felt  
de need o' clo'es—  
Lady Mis' Eve she 's a-walkin', too.

Den she shuk 'er yaller ringlets down an'  
'lowed dat she was dressed—

Lady Mis' Eve, she 's a-walkin', too—  
Mister Devil he come quoilin'—everbody  
knows de rest—  
Lady Mis' Eve she 's a-walkin', too.

Then, changing to a solemn, staccato  
measure, it went on:

Ole Marse Adam! Ole Marse Adam!  
Et de lady's apple up an' give her all de blame.  
Greedy-gut, greedy-gut, whar is yo' shame?  
Ole Marse Adam, man, whar is yo' shame?

Ole Marse Adam! Ole Marse Adam!  
Caught de apple in 'is neck an' made it  
mighty so'e,



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An' so we po' gran'chillen has to swaller  
roun' de co'e.

Ole Marse Adam, man, whar is yo' shame?

Ole Marse Adam! Ole Marse Adam!  
Praised de lady's attitudes an' compliment  
'er figur'—

Did n't have de principle of any decent  
nigger.

Ole Marse Adam, man, whar is yo' shame?

It was a long pull of five miles up the winding stream, but the spirit of jollity had dispelled all sense of time, and when at last the foremost boat, doubling a jutting clump of willows, came suddenly into the open at the foot of the hill, the startling presentment of the white house illuminated with festoons of Chinese lanterns, which extended across its entire width and down to the landing, was like a dream of fairy-land.

It was indeed a smiling welcome, and exclamations of delight announced the passage of the boats in turn as they rounded the willow bend.

The firing of a single cannon, with a

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simultaneous display of fireworks, and music by the plantation band, celebrated the landing of the last boat.

Servants in the simple old-fashioned dress—checked homespun with white accessories, to which were added for the occasion, great rosettes of crimson worn upon the breast—took care of the party at the landing, bringing up the rear with hand-luggage, which they playfully balanced upon their heads or shifted with fancy steps.

The old-time supper—of the sort which made the mahogany groan—was served on the broad back “gallery,” while the plantation folk danced in the clearing beyond, a voice from the basement floor calling out the figures.

This was a great sight.

Left here to their own devices as to dress, the negroes made so dazzling a display that, no matter how madly they danced, they could scarcely answer the challenge of their own riotous color schemes.

Single dancers followed; then “ladyes

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and gentiles" in pairs, taking fantastic steps which would shame a modern dancing-master without once awakening a blush in a maiden's cheek.

The dancing was refined, even dainty, to-night, the favorite achievement of the women being the mincing step taken so rapidly as to simulate suspension of effort, which set the dancers spinning like so many tops, although there was much languid posing, with exchange of salutations and curtsying galore.

Yet not a twirl of fan or dainty lift of flounce—to grace a figure or display a dexterous foot—but expressed a primitive idea of high etiquette.

The "fragments" left over from the banquet of the upper porch—many of them great unbroken dishes, meats, game, and sweets—provided a great banquet for the dancers below, and the gay late feasters furnished entertainment, fresh and straight from life, to the company above, for whose benefit many of their most daring sallies were evidently thrown out—and who, after

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their recent experiences, were pleased to be so restfully entertained.

Toasts, drunk in ginger-pop and per-simmon beer innocent of guile, were offered after grace at the beginning of the supper, the toaster stepping out into the yard and bowing to the gallery while he raised his glass or, literally, his tin cup—the passage of the master's bottle among the men, later in the evening, being a distinct feature.

The first toast was offered to the ladies—"Mistus an' Company-ladies"; and the next, following a suggestion of the first table, where the host had been much honored, was worded about in this wise:

"We drinks to de health, an' wealth, an' de long life of de *leadin' gentleman o' Brake Island*, who done put 'isself to so much pains an' money to give dis party. But to make de toast accordin' to manners, so hit 'll fit de gentleman's visitors long wid hisself, I say let 's drink to who but 'OLE MARSE ADAM!'"

It is easy to start a laugh when a

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festive crowd is primed for fun, and this toast, respectfully submitted with a low bow by an ancient and privileged veteran of the rosined bow, was met with screams of delight.

## V

A RESOURCEFUL little island it was that could provide entertainment for a party of society folk for nearly a fortnight with never a repetition to pall or to weary.

The men, equipped for hunting or fishing, and accompanied by several negro men-servants with a supplementary larder on wheels,—which is to say, a wagon-load of bread, butter, coffee, condiments, and wines, with cooking utensils,—left the house early every morning, before the ladies were up.

They discussed engineering schemes over their fishing-poles and game-bags, explored the fastnesses of the brake, eavesdropped for the ultimate secret of the woods, and plumbed for the bayou's heart, bringing from them all sundry tangible witnesses of geologic or other conditions of scientific values.