

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

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.

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Most of these "witnesses," however, it must be confessed, were immediately available for spit or grill, while many went—so bountiful was the supply—to friends in the city with the cards of their captors.

There are champagne bottles even yet along the marshes of Brake Island, bottles whose bellies are as full of suggestion as of mud, and whose tongueless mouths fairly whistle as if to recount the canards which enlivened the swamp-land in those halcyon days of youth and hope and inexperience.

Until the dressing-hour, in the early afternoons which they frankly called the evening, the young women coddled their bloom in linen cambric night-gowns, mostly, reading light romance and verse, which they quoted freely under the challenge of the masculine presence.

Or they told amazing mammy-tales of voodoo-land and the ghost-country for the amused delectation of their gentle hostess, who felt herself warmed

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and cheered in the sunshine of these Southern temperaments. It seemed all a part of the poetry and grace of a novel and romantic life.

Here were a dozen young women, pretty and care-free as flowers, any one of whom could throw herself across the foot of a bed and snatch a superfluous "beauty-sleep" in the midst of all manner of jollity and laughter.

Most of them spoke several languages and as many dialects, frequently passing from one to another in a single sentence for easy subtlety or color, and with distinct gain in the direction of music.

Possibly they knew somewhat of the grammar of but a single tongue beside their own, their fluency being more of a traditional inheritance than an acquisition. Such is the mellow equipment of many of our richest speakers.

Not one but could pull to pieces her Olympe bonnet and nimbly retrim it with pins, to match her face or fancy—or dance a Highland fling in her 'broideder nightie, or sing—

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How they all did sing—and play! Several were accomplished musicians. One knew the Latin names of much of the flora of the island, and found time and small coins sufficient to interest a colony of eager pickaninnies to gather specimens for her “herbarium.”

Without ever having prepared a meal, they could even cook, as they had soon amply proven by the heaping confections which were always in evidence at the man-hour—bon-bons, kisses, pralines, what not?—all fragrant with mint, orange-flower, rose-leaf, or violet, or heavy with pecans or cocoanut.

In the afternoon, when the men came home, they frequently engaged in contests of skill—in rowing or archery or croquet; or, following nature’s manifold suggestions, they drifted in couples, paddling indolently among the floating lily-pads on the bayou, or reclining among the vines in the summer-houses, where they sipped iced orange syrup or claret sangaree, either one a safe lubricator, by mild inspiration or suggestion,

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of the tongue of young love, which is apt to become tied at the moment of most need.

With the poems of Moore to reinforce him with easy grace of words, a broad-shouldered fellow would naïvely declare himself a *peri*, standing disconsolate at the gate of his lady's heart, while she quoted Fanny Fern for her defense, or, if she were passing intellectual and of a broader culture, she would give him invitation in form of rebuff from "The Lady of the Lake," or a scathing line from Shakspeare. Of course, all the young people knew their Shakspeare—more or less.

They had their fortunes told in a half-dozen fashions, by withered old crones whose dim eyes, discerning life's secrets held lightly in suspension, mated them recklessly *on suspicion*.

Visiting the colored churches, they attended some of the novel services of the plantation, as, for instance, a certain baptismal wedding, which is to say a combined ceremony, which was in this

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case performed quite regularly and decorously in the interest of a coal-black piccaninny, artlessly named Lily Blanche in honor of two of the young ladies present whom the bride-mother had seen but once out driving, but whose gowns of flowered organdy, lace parasols, and leghorn hats had stirred her sense of beauty and virtue to action.

Although there was much amusement over this incongruous function, the absence of any sense of embarrassment in witnessing so delicate a ceremony—one which in another setting would easily have become indelicate—was no doubt an unconscious tribute to the primitive simplicity of the contracting parties.

And always there were revival meetings to which they might go and hear dramatic recitals of marvelous personal "experiences," full of imagery,—travels in heaven or hell,—with always the resounding human note which ever prevails in vital reach for truth. Through it all they discerned the cry

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which finds the heart of a listener and brings him into indissoluble relation with his brother man, no matter how great the darkness out of which the note may come. It is universal.

The call is in every heart, uttered or unexpressed, and one day it will pierce the heavens, finding the blue for him who sends it forth, and for the listener as well if his heart be attuned.

Let who will go and sit through one of these services, and if he does not come away subdued and silent, more tender at heart, and, if need be, stronger of hand to clasp and to lift, perhaps—well, perhaps his mind is open only to the pictorial and the spectacular.

There is no telling how long the house-party would have remained in Paradise but for the inexorable calendar which warned certain of its members that they would be expected to answer the royal summons of Comus at the approaching carnival; and of course the important fact that certain bills from

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the legislature affecting the public weal were awaiting the governor's signature.

A surprising number of marriages followed this visit, seeming to confirm a report of an absurd number of engagements made on the island.

There is a certain old black woman living yet "down by the old basin" in French New Orleans, a toothless old crone who, by the irony of circumstance, is familiarly known as "Ol' Mammy Molar," who "remembers" many things of this time and occasion, which she glibly calls "de silveringineer party," and who likes nothing better than an audience.

If she is believed, this much too literal account of a far-away time is most meager and unfaithful, for she does most strenuously insist that, for instance, there was served at the servants' table on that first night—

But let her have her way of it for a moment—just a single breath :

"Why, honey," she closes her eyes as she begins, the better to see memory

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behind them. "Why, honey, de champagne wine was passed aroun' to de hands all dat indurin' infair in *water-buckets*, an' dipped out in *gou'd dippers-full*, bilin' over so fast an' fizzin' so it 'd tickle yo' mouf to drink it. An' Marse Harol' Le Duc, he stood on a *pianner-stool* on de back gallery an' th'owed out gol' dollars by de hatful for any of us niggers to pick up; an' de guv'ner, ol' Marse Abe Lincoln, he fired off sky-rockers an' read out freedom papers.

"An' mids' all de dance an' reveltry, a bolt o' thunder fell like a cannon-ball outen a clair sky, an' we looked up an' lo an' beholst, here was a vision of a big hand writin' on de sky, an' a voice say, '*Eat up de balance ef anything is found wantin'!*' an' wid dat, dey plunged in like a herd o' swine boun' for de sea, an' dey devoured de fragmintsan' popped mo' corks, an' dipped out mo' champagne wine, an' de mo' dey dipped out champagne wine, de mo' dey 'd dance. An' de mo' dey 'd dance, de mo' de wine would flow."

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Possibly the old woman's obvious confusion of thought has some explanation in the fact of the presence of the governor of the State, who, introduced as a high dignitary, did make a little speech late that night, thanking the colored people in terms of compliment for their dancing; and any impression made here was so quickly overlaid by the deeper experiences of the war that a blending can easily be explained.

There was a shower of coins—"pica-yunes" only—thrown during the evening by the master, a feature of the dance being to recover as many of them as possible without breaking step. So the old woman's memory is not so far afield, although as a historian she might need a little editing. But such even as this is much of the so-called "history" which, bound in calf, dishonors the world's libraries to-day.

It is so easy, seeing cobwebs upon a record,—cobwebs which may not be quite construed as alphabet,—to interpret them as hieroglyphics of import,

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instead of simply brushing them away, or relegating them, where they belong, to the dusky domain of the myth out of which we may expect only weird suggestion, as from the mold of pressed rosemary, typifying remembrance dead.

The house-party, which in this poor retrospect seems to have devoted itself almost wholly to pleasure, was nevertheless followed by immediate work upon the project in behalf of which it was planned.

With this main motive was also the ulterior and most proper one in Harold's mind of introducing his wife in so intimate a fashion to some of the important members of society, who would date life-friendships from the pleasant occasion of helping him to open his own door to them.

Some thousands of dollars went into the quicksands of the marshes before the foundations were laid for the arch of a proposed great bridge, beneath which his boats should sail to their

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landing. With the arrogant bravado of an impulsive boy challenged to action, he began his arch first. Its announcement of independence and munificence would express the position he had taken. Sometimes it is well to put up a bold front, even if one needs work backward from it.

Harold moved fast—but the gods of war moved faster!

Scarcely had a single column of solid masonry risen above the palmetto swamp when Fort Sumter's guns sounded. The smell of gunpowder penetrated the fastnesses of the brake, and yet, though his nostrils quivered like those of an impetuous war-horse, the master held himself in rein with the thought of her who would be cruelly alone without him. And he said to himself, while he reared his arch: "Two out of three are enough! I have taken their terror island for my portion. They may have garlands upon my bridge—when they come sailing up my canal as heroes!"

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"The brave, unthinking fellow, after embracing his beloved, dashed to the front"

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But the next whiff from the battleground stopped work on the arch. The brothers had fallen side by side.

Madly seizing both the recovered swords, declaring he would "fight as three," the brave, unthinking fellow, after embracing his beloved, put one of her hands in Hannah's and the other in Israel's, and, commending them to God by a speechless lift of his dark eyes, mounted his horse and dashed, as one afraid to look back, to the front.

VI

EVERY ONE knows the story of "poor Harold Le Duc"—how, captured, wounded, he lay for more than a year on the edge of insanity in a Federal hospital. Every one knows of the birth of his child on the lonely island, with only black hands to receive and tend it, and how the waiting mother, guarded by the faithful two, and loved by the three hundred loyal slaves who prayed for her life, finally passed out of it on the very day of days for which she had planned a great Christmas banquet for them in honor of their master's triumphant return.

The story is threadbare. Everyone knows how it happened that "the old people," Colonel and Madame Le Duc, having taken flight upon report of a battle, following their last son, had crossed the lines and been unable

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from that day to communicate with the island; of the season of the snake-plague in the heart of the brake, when rattlers and copperheads, spreading-adders, moccasins, and conger-eels came up to the island, squirming, darting, or lazily sunning themselves in its flowering grounds and lily-ponds, some even finding their way into the very beds of the people; when the trees were deserted of birds, and alligators prowled across the terraces, depredating the poultry-yard and even threatening the negro children.

In the presence of so manifold disaster many of the negroes returned to voodooism, and nude dances by weird fires offered to Satan supplanted the shouting of the name of Christ in the churches. A red streak in the sky over the brake was regarded as an omen of blood—the thunderbolt which struck the smoke-stack of the sugar-house a command to stop work.

Old women who had treated the sick with savory teas of roots and herbs

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lapsed into conjuring with bits of hair and bones. A rabbit's foot was more potent than medicine; a snake's tooth wet with swamp scum and dried in the glare of burning sulphur more to be feared than God.

War, death and birth and death again, followed by scant provender threatening famine, and then by the invasion of serpents, had struck terror into hearts already tremulous and half afraid.

The word "freedom" had scarcely reached the island and set the air vibrating with hope, commingled with dread, when the reported death of the master came as a grim corroboration of the startling prospect.

All this is an open story.

But how Israel and Hannah, aided in their flight by a faithful few, slipped away one dark night, carrying the young child with them to bear her safely to her father's people, knowing nothing of their absence, pending the soldier's return—for the two never believed him dead; how, when they had nearly

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reached the rear lands of the paternal place, they were met by an irresistible flood which turned them back; and how, barely escaping with their lives, they were finally rowed in a skiff quite through the hall of the great house—so high, indeed, that Mammy rescued a family portrait from the wall as they passed; how the baby slept through it all, and the dog followed, swimming—

This is part of the inside history never publicly told.

The little party was taken aboard a boat which waited midstream, a tug which became so overcrowded that it took no account of passengers whom it carried safely to the city. Of the poor forlorn lot, a few found their way back to the plantations in search of survivors, but in most instances, having gone too soon, they returned disheartened.

Madame Le Duc, who, with her guests and servants, had fled from the homestead at the first warning, did not hear for months of the flight of the old people

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with her grandchild, and of their supposed fate. No one doubted that all three had perished in the river, and the news came as tardy death tidings again—tidings arriving after the manner of war news, which often put whole families in and out of mourning, in and out of season.

VII

THERE is not space here to dwell upon Harold's final return to Brake Island, bent and broken, unkempt,—disguised by the marks of sorrow, unrecognized, as he had hoped to be, of the straggling few of his own negroes whom he encountered camping in the wood, imprisoned by fear. These, mistaking him for a tramp, avoided him. He had heard the news *en route*,—the "news," then several years old,—and had, nevertheless, yielded to a sort of blind, stumbling fascination which drew him back to the scene of his happiness and his despair. Here, after all, was the real battle-field—and he was again vanquished.

When he reached the homestead, he found it wholly deserted. The "big house," sacred to superstition through its succession of tragedies, was as Mam-

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my and Israel had left it. Even its larder was untouched, and the key of the wine-cellar lay imbedded in rust in sight of the cob-webbed door.

It was a sad man, prematurely gray, and still gaunt—and white with the pallor of the hospital prison—who, after this sorrowful pilgrimage to Brake Island, appeared, as from the grave, upon the streets of New Orleans. When he was reinstated in his broken home, and known once more of his family and friends, he would easily have become the popular hero of the hour, for the gay world flung its gilded doors open to him.

The Latin temperament of old New Orleans kept always a song in her throat, even through all the sad passages of her history; and there was never a year when the French quarter, coquette that she was, did not shake her flounces and dance for a season with her dainty toes against the lower side of Canal Street.

But Harold was not a fellow of forget-

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ful mind. The arch of his life was broken, it is true, but like that of the bridge he had begun—a bridge which was to invite the gay world, yes; but which would ever have dominated it, letting its sails pass under—he could be no other than a worthy ruin. Had his impetuous temper turned upon himself on his return to the island, where devastation seemed to mock him at every turn, there is no telling where it might have driven him. But a lonely mother, and the knowledge that his father had died of a broken heart upon the report of his death, the last of his three sons—the pathetic, dependence of his mother upon him—the appeal of her doting eyes and the exigencies of an almost hopeless financial confusion—all these combined as a challenge to his manhood to take the helm in the management of a wrecked estate.

It was a saving situation. How often is work the great savior of men!

Once stirred in the direction of effort, Harold soon developed great genius for

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the manipulation of affairs. Reorganization began with his control.

Square-shouldered and straight as an Indian, clear of profile, deep-eyed, and thoughtful of visage, the young man with the white hair was soon a marked figure. When even serious men "went foolish over him," it is not surprising that ambitious mothers of marriageable daughters, in these scant days of dearth of men, should have exhibited occasional fluttering anxieties while they placed their broken fortunes in his hands.

Reluctantly at first, but afterward seeing his way through experience, Harold became authorized agent for some of the best properties along the river, saving what was left, and sometimes even recovering whole estates for the women in black who had known before only how to be good and beautiful in the romantic homes and gardens whose pervading perfume had been that of the orange-blossom.

It was on returning hurriedly from a trip to one of these places on the upper

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river—the property of one Marie Estelle Josephine Ramsey de La Rose, widowed at "Yellow Tavern"—that he sought the ferry skiff on the night old man Israel answered the call.