

VIII

LITTLE the old man dreamed, while he waited, midstream, trying to think out his problem, that the solution was so near at hand.

We have seen how the old wife waited and prayed on the shore; how with her shaded mind she groped, as many a wiser has done, for a comforting, common-sense understanding of faith, that intangible "substance of things hoped for," that elusive "evidence of things not seen."

In a moment after she heard the creaking of the timbers as the skiff chafed the landing, even while she rose, as was her habit, to see who might be coming over so late, she dimly perceived two men approaching, Israel and another; and presently she saw that Israel held the man's hand and that he walked unsteadily.

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

She started, fearing that her man was hurt; but before she could find voice of fear or question, Israel had drawn the stranger to her and was saying in a broken voice:

"Hannah! Hannah! Heah Mars' Harol'!"

Only a moment before, with her dim eyes fixed upon the sky, she had experienced a realization of faith, and believed herself confidently awaiting her master's coming. And yet, seeing him now in the flesh before her, she exclaimed:

"What foolishness is dis, ole man? Don't practice no jokes on me to-night, Isrul!"

Her voice was almost gruff, and she drew back as she spoke. But even while she protested, Harold had laid his hand upon her arm.

"Mammy," he whispered huskily, "don't you know your 'indurin' devil'—?" (This had been her last, worst name for her favorite during his mischief period.)

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

Harold never finished his sentence. The first sound of his voice had identified him, but the shock had confused her. When at last she sobbed "Hush! I say, hush!" her arms were about his knees and she was crying aloud.

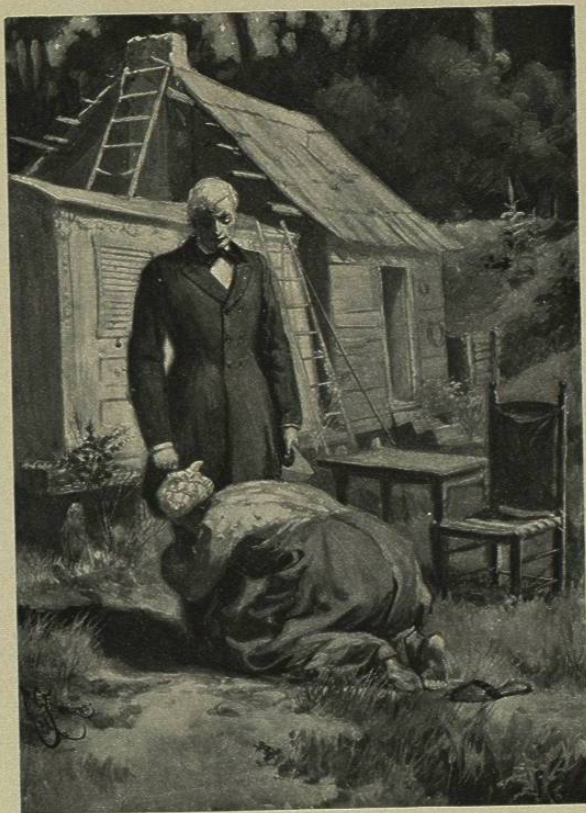
"Glo-o-o — oh — glo-o-o — glo-o-ry! Oh, my Gord!" But presently, wiping her eyes, she stammered: "What kep' you so, Baby? Hol' me up, chile—hol' me!"

She was falling, but Harold steadied her with strong arms, pressing her into her chair, but retaining her trembling hand while he sat upon the low table beside her.

He could not speak at once, but, seeing her head drop upon her bosom, he called quickly to Israel. For answer, a clarion note, in no wise muffled by the handkerchief from which it issued, came from the woodpile. Israel was shy of his emotions and had hidden himself.

By the time he appeared, sniffing, Hannah had rallied, and was pressing

[102]



"Her arms were about his knees"

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

Harold from her to better study his face at long range.

"What happened to yo' hair, Baby?" she said presently. "Hit looks as bright as dat flaxion curl o' yoze I got in my Testamen'. I was lookin' at it only a week ago las' Sunday, an' wishin' I could read de book 'long wid de curl."

"It is much lighter than that, Mammy. It is whiter than yours. I have lived the sorrows of a long life in a few years.

Israel still stood somewhat aside and wastaking no note of their speech, which he presently interrupted nervously:

"H-how you reckon Mars' Harol' knowed me, Hannah? He—he reco'nized his horn! You ricollec' when I fotched dat horn f'om de islan' roun' my neck, clean 'crost de flood, you made game o' me, an' I say I mought have need of it? But of co'se I did n't ca'culate to have it *ac-chilly* call Mars' Harol' home! I sho' did n't! But dat 's what it done. Cep'n' for de horn's call bein' so familius, he 'd 'a' paid me my dime like a stranger an' passed on."

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

At this Harold laughed.

"Sure enough, Uncle Israel; you did n't collect my ferriage, did you? I reckon you 'll have to charge that."

Israel chuckled:

"Lord, Hannah, listen! Don't dat soun' like ole times? Dey don't charge nothin' in dese han'-to-mouf days, Marse Harol'—not roun' heah."

"But tell me, Uncle Israel, how did you happen to bring that old horn with you—sure enough?" Harold interrupted.

"I jes fotched it 'ca'se I could n't leave it—de way Hannah snatched yo' po'trit off de wall—all in dat deluge. Hit's heah in de cabin now to witness de trip. But in co'se o' time de horn, hit come handy when I tuk de ferry-skift.

"Well, Hannah, when he stepped a-boad, he all but shuk de ole skift to pieces. I ought to knowed dat Le Duc high-step, but I did n't. I jes felt his tread, an' s'luted him for a gentleman, an' axed him for Gord sake to set down befo' we 'd be capsided in de river. I

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

war n't cravin' to git drowned wid no aristoc'acy.

"De moon she was hidin', dat time, an' we could n't see much; but he leant over an' he say, 'Uncle,' he say, 'who blowed dat horn 'crost de river?' An' I say, 'Me, sir. I blowed it.' Den he say, 'Whose horn is dat?' An' I 'spon', 'Hit 's *my* horn, sir.' Den my conscience begin to gnaw, an' I sort o' stammered, 'Leastways, it b'longs to a frien' o' mine wha' look like he ain't nuver gwine to claim it.' I ain't say who de frien' was, but d'rec'ly he pushed me to de wall. He ax me p'intedly to my face, 'What yo' frien' name, uncle?' An at dat I got de big head an' I up an' snap out:

"'Name Le Duc, sir, Harry Le Duc.'

"Jes free an' easy, so, I say it. Lord have mussy! Ef I 'd s'picioned dat was Mars' Harol' settin' up dar listenin' at me callin' his name so sociable an' free, I 'd 'a' drapped dem oa's overbo'ad. I sho' would.

"Well, when I say 'Harry Le Duc,'

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

seem like he got kind o' seasick, de way he bent his head down, an' I ax him how he come on—ef he got de miz'ry anywhars. An' wid dat he sort o' give out a dry laugh, an' den what you reckon he ax me? He say, 'Uncle, is you married?' An' wid dat I laughed. 'T war n't no trouble for me to laugh at dat. I 'spon', 'Yas, sirree! You bet I is! Does I look like air rovin' bachelor?' I was jes about half mad by dis time.

"Well, so he kep' on quizzifyin' me: ax me whar I live, an' I tol' 'im I was a ole risidenter on de levee heah for five years past; an' so we run on, back an' fo'th, tell we teched de sho'. An' time de skift bumped de landin' he laid his han' on me an' he say, 'Unc' Isrul, whar 's Mammy Hannah?' An' den—bless Gord! I knowed him! But I ain't trus' myself to speak. I des nachelly clawed him an' drug him along to you. I seen de fulfilment o' promise, an' my heart was bustin' full, but I ain't got no halleluah tongue like you. I jes

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

passed him along to you an' made for de woodpile!"

It was a great moment for Harold, this meeting with the only people living who could tell all there was to know of those who were gone.

Hannah's memory was too photographic for judicious reminiscence. The camera's great imperfection lies in its very accuracy in recording non-essentials, with resulting confusion of values. So the old woman, when she turned her mental search-light backward, "beginning at the beginning," which to Harold seemed the end of all—the day of his departure,—recounted every trivial incident of the days, while Harold listened through the night, often suffering keenly in his eagerness to know the crucial facts, yet fearing to interrupt her lest some precious thing be lost.

A reflected sunrise was reddening the sky across the river when she reached the place in the story relating to the baby. Her description needed not any

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

coloring of love to make it charming, and while he listened the father murmured under his breath:

"And then to have lost her!"

"What dat you say, Marse Harol'?" Hannah gasped, her quick ears having caught his despairing tone.

"Oh, nothing, Mammy. Go on. It did seem cruel to have the little one drowned. But I don't blame you. It is a miracle that you old people saved yourselves."

The old woman turned to her husband and threw up her hands.

"Wh-why, Isrul!" she stammered. "What's de matter wid you—to set heah all night an' listen at me talkin' all roun' de baby—an' ain't named her yit!"

She rose and, drawing Harold after her, entered the door at her back. As she pulled aside the curtain a ray of sunlight fell full upon the sleeping child.

"Heah yo' baby, Baby!" Her low voice, steadied by its passages through greater crises, was even and gentle.

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

She laid her hand upon the child.

"Wek up, baby! Wek up!" she cried. "Yo' pa done come! Wek up!"

Without stirring even so much as a thread of her golden hair upon the pillow, the child opened a pair of great blue eyes and looked from Mammy's face to the man's. Then,—so much surer is a child's faith than another's,—doubting not at all, she raised her little arms.

Her father, already upon his knees beside her, bent over, bringing his neck within her embrace, while he inclosed her slender body with his arms. Thus he remained, silent, for a moment, for the agony of his joy was beyond tears or laughter. But presently he lifted his child, and, sitting, took her upon his lap. He could not speak yet, for while he smoothed her beautiful hair and studied her face, noting the blue depths of her darkly fringed eyes, the name that trembled for expression within his lips was "Agnes—Agnes."

"How beautiful she is!" he whis-

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

pered presently; and then, turning to Hannah, "And how carefully you have kept her! Everything—so sweet."

"Oh, yas!" the old woman hastened to answer. "We ain't spared no pains on 'er, Marse Harol'. She done had eve'ything we could git for her, by hook or by crook. Of co'se she ain't had no *white kin* to christen her, an' dat was a humiliation to us. She did n't have no to say legal person to bring 'er for'ard, so she ain't nuver been *ca'yed up in church*; but she 's had every sort o' christenin' we could reach.

"I knowed yo' pa's ma, ole Ma'am Toinette, she'd turn in her grave lessen her gran'-chil' was christened Cat'lic, so I had her christened dat way. Dat ole half-blind priest, Father Some'h'n' other, wha' comes from Bayou de Glaise, he was conductin' mass meetin' or some'h'n' other, down here in Bouligny, an' I took de baby down, an' he sprinkled her in Latin or some'h'n' other, an' ornamented behind her ears wid unctious ile, an' crossed her little

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

forehead, an' made her eat a few grains o' table salt. He *done it straight*, wid all his robes on, an' I g'in him a good dollar, too. An' dat badge you see on her neck, a sister o' charity, wid one o' dese clair-starched ear-flap sunbonnets on, she put dat on her. She say she give it to her to wear so 's she could n't git drowned—*like as ef I'd let her drown*. Yit an' still I lef' it so, an' I even buys a fresh blue ribbin for it, once-t an' a while. I hear 'em say dat blue hit's de Hail Mary color—an' it becomes her eyes, too. Dey say what don't pizen fattens, an' I know dem charms could n't do her no hurt, an', of 'co'se, we don't know all. Maybe dey mought ketch de eye of a hoverin' angel in de air an' bring de baby into Heavenly notice. Of co'se, I would n't put no sech as dat on her. I ain't been raised to it, an' I ain't no beggin' hycoprite. But I would n't take it off, nuther.

"Den, I knowed ole Mis', yo' ma, she was 'Pistopal, an' Miss Aggie she was Numitarium; so every time a preacher'd

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

be passin' I'd git him to perform it his way. Me bein' Baptis' I did n't have no nigger baptism to saddle on her.

"So she's bounteously baptized—yas, sir. I reasoned it out dat ef dey's only one *true* baptism, an' I war n't to say *shore* which one it was, I better git 'em all, an' only de *onlies'* true one would *count*; an' den ag'in, ef all honest baptisms is good, den de mo' de merrier, as de Book say. Of co'se I knowed pyore rain-water sprinkled on wid a blessin' could n't hurt no chile.

"You see, when one side de house is *French distraction* an' de yether is *English to-scent*, an' dey's a dozen side-nations wid *blood to tell* in all de branches,—well, hit minds me o' dis *ba'm of a thousan' flowers* dat ole Mis' used to think so much of. Hits hard to 'stinguish out any one flagrams.

"But talkin' about de baby, she ain't been deprived, no mo' 'n de Lord deprived her, for a season, of her rights to high livin' an'—an' aristoc'acy—an'—an' petigree, an' posterity, an' all sech as dat.

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

"An'—

"What dat you say, Mars' Harol'? What *name* is we—"

"We ain't dast to give 'er no name, Baby, no mo' 'n jes Blossom. I got 'er wrote down in five citificatees 'Miss Blossom,' jes so. No, sir. I knows my colored place, an' I'll go so far, an' dat's all de further. She was jes as much a blossom befo' she was christened as she was arterwards, so my namin' 'er don't count. I was 'mos' tempted to call out 'Agnes' to de preachers, when dey'd look to me for a name, seein' it was her right—like as ef she was borned to it; but—I ain't nuver imposed on her. No, sir, we ain't imposed on her nowadays.

"De on'iest wrong I ever done her— an' Gord knows I done it to save her to my arms, an' for you, marster—de on'iest wrong was to let her go widout her little sunbonnet an' git her skin browned up so maybe nobody would n't s'picion she was clair white an' like as not try to wrest her from me. An' *one*

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

time, when a uppish yo'ng man ast me her name, I said it straight, but I see him look mighty cu'yus, an' I spoke up an' say, 'What other name you 'spect' her to have? My name is Hannah Le Duc, an' I's dat child's daddy's mammy.' Excuse me, Mars' Harold, but you know I is yo' *black* mammy—*an' I was in so'e straits.*

"So de yo'ng man, well, he did n't seem to have no raisin'. He jes sort o' whistled, an' say I sho is got one mighty blon' gran'chil'—an' I 'spon', 'Yas, sir; so it seems.'

"An' dat 's de on'ies' wrong I ever done her. She sets up at her little dinner-table sot wid a table-cloth an' a white napkin,—an' I done buyed her a ginuine silver-plated napkin-ring to hold it in, too,—an' she says her own little blessin'—dat short 'Grace o' Gord—material binefets,' one o' Miss Aggie's; I learned it to her. No, she ain't been handled keerless, ef she is been livin' on de outside o' de levee, like free niggers. But we ain't to say *lived* here, 'not perzackly,

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

marster. We jes been waitin' along, so, dese five years—waitin' for to-night.

"I ain't niver sorted her clo'es out into no bureau; I keeps 'em all in her little trunk, perpared to move along."

For a moment the realization of the culmination of her faith seemed to suffuse her soul, and as she proceeded, her voice fell in soft, rhythmic undulations.

"Ya-as, Mars' Harol', Mammy's baby boy, yo' ol' nuss she been waitin', an' o-ole man Isrul *he* been waitin', an' de Blossom *she* been waitin'. I 'spec' she had de firmes' faith, arter all, de baby did. Day by day we all waited—an' night by night. An' sometimes when courage would burn low an' de lamp o' faith grow dim, seem like we 'd 'a' broke loose an' started a-wanderin' in a sort o' blind search, '*cep'n' for de river.*

"Look like ef we 'd ever went beyan' de river's call, we 'd been same as de chillen o' Isrul lost in de tanglement o' de wilderness. All we river chillen, we boun' to stay by her, same as toddlin' babies hangs by a mammy's skirts. She

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

'll whup us one day, an' chastise us severe; den she 'll bring us into de light, same as she done to-night—same as reel mammies does.

“An', Mars' Harol'—”

She lowered her voice.

“Mars' Harol', don't tell me she don't know! I tell yer, me an' dis River we done spent many a dark night together under de stars, an' we done talked an' answered one another so many lonely hours—an' she done showed us so many mericles on land an' water—

“I tell yer, I done found out some'h'n' about de River, Mars' Harol'. She 's—why, she 's—

“Oh, ef I could only write it all down to go in a book! We been th'ough some *merac'lous* times together, sho' 's you born—sho' 's you born.

“She 's a mericle mystery, sho'!

“You lean over an' dip yo' han' in her an' you take it up an' you say it's *wet*. You dig yo' oars into her, an' she 'll spin yo' boat over her breast. You dive

[118]

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

down into her, an' you come up—*or don't come up*. Some eats her. Some drinks her. Some gethers wealth outen her. Some draps it into her. Some drownds in her.

“An' she gives an' takes, an' seem like all her chillen gits satisfaction outen her, one way an' another; but yit an' still, she ain't nuver flustered. On an' on she goes—rain or shine—high water—low water—all de same—on an' on.

“When she craves diamonds for her neck, she reaches up wid long onvisible hands an' gethers de stars out'n de firmamint.

“De moon is her common breastpin, an' de sun—

“Even he don't faze her. She takes what she wants, an' sends back his fire every day.

“De mists is a veil for her face, an' de showers fringes it.

“Sunrise or dusklight, black night or midday, every change she answers *whilst she 's passin'*.

[119]

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

"But who ever *inticed* her to stop or to look or listen? Nobody, Baby. An' why?"

"Oh, Lord! ef eve'ybody only knowed!

"You see, all sech as dat, I used to study over it an' ponder befo' we started to talk back an' fo'th—de River an' me.

"One dark night she heared me cryin' low on de bank, whilst de ole man stepped into de boat to row 'crost de water, an' she felt Wood-duck settle heavy on her breast, an' she seen dat we carried de same troublous thought—searchin' an' waitin' for the fulfilment o' promise.

"An' so we started to call—an' to answer, heart to heart."

The story is nearly told. No doubt many would be willing to have it stop here. But a tale of the river is a tale of greed, and must have satisfaction.

While father and child sat together, Israel came, bringing fresh chips. He had been among the woodpiles again. This time there followed him the dog.

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

"Why, Blucher!" Harold exclaimed. "Blucher, old fellow!" And at his voice the dog, whining and sniffing, climbed against his shoulder, even licking his face and his hand. Then, running off, he barked at Israel and Hannah, telling them in fine dog Latin who the man was who had come. Then he crouched at his feet, and, after watching his face a moment, laid his head upon his master's right foot, a trick Harold had taught him as a pup.

IX

OF course Harold wished to take the entire family home with him at once, and would hear to nothing else until Hannah, serving black coffee to him from her furnace, in the dawn, begged that she and Israel might have "a few days to rest an' to study" before moving.

It was on the second evening following this, at nightfall, while her man was away in his boat, that the old woman rose from her chair and, first studying the heavens and then casting about her to see that no one was near, she went down to the water, slowly picking her way to a shallow pool between the rafts and the shore. She sat here at first, upon the edge of the bank, frankly dropping her feet into the water while she seemed to begin to talk—or possibly she sang, for the low sound which only occasionally rose above the small noises

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

of the rafts was faintly suggestive of a priest's intoning.

For a moment only, she sat thus. Then she began to lower herself into the water, until, leaning, she could lay her face against the sod, so that a wave passed over it, and when, letting her weight go, she subsided, with arms extended, into the shallow pool, a close listener might have heard an undulating song, so like the river's in tone as to be separable from it only through the faint suggestion of words, interrupted or drowned at intervals by the creaking and knocking of the rafts and the gurgling of the sucking eddies about them.

The woman's voice—song, speech, or what not?—seemed intermittent, as if in converse with another presence.

Suddenly, while she stood thus, she dropped bodily, going fully under the water for a brief moment, as if renewing her baptism, and when she presently lifted herself, she was crying aloud, sobbing as a child sobs in the awful mo-

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

mentary despair of grief at the untwining of arms—shaken, unrestrained.

While she stood thus for a few minutes only,—a pathetic waste of sorrow, wet, dark and forlorn, alone on the night-shore,—a sudden wind, a common evening current, threw a foaming wave over the logs beside her so that its spray covered her over; while the straining ropes, breaking and bumping timbers, with the slow dripping of the spent wave through the raft, seemed to answer and possibly to assuage her agitation; for, as the wind passed and the waters subsided, she suddenly grew still, and, climbing the bank as she had come, walked evenly as one at peace, into her cabin.

No one will ever know what, precisely, was the nature of this last communion. Was it simply an intimate leave-taking of a faithful companionship grown dear through years of stress? Or had it deeper meaning in a realization—or hallucination—as to the personality of the river—the “secret” to which she

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

only once mysteriously referred in a gush of confidence on her master's return?

Perhaps she did not know herself, or only vaguely felt what she could not tell. Certainly not even to her old husband, one with her in life and spirit, did she try to convey this mystic revelation. We know by intuition the planes upon which our minds may meet with those of our nearest and dearest. To the good man and soldier, Israel,—the prophet, even, who held up the wavering hands of the imaginative woman when her courage waned, pointing to the hour of fulfilment,—the great river, full of potencies for good or ill, could be only a river. As a mirror it had shown him divinity, and in its character it might *typify* to his image-loving mind another thing which service would make it precious. But what he would have called his sanity—had he known the word—would have obliged him to stop there.

The stars do not tell, and the poor

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

moon—at best only hinting what the sun says—is fully half-time off her mind. And the SOUL OF THE RIVER—if, indeed, it has once broken silence—may not speak again.

And, so, her secret is safe—safe even if the broken winds did catch a breath, here and there, sending it flurriedly through and over the logs until they trembled with a sort of mad harp-consciousness, and were set a-quivering for just one full strain—one coherent expression of soul-essence—when the wave broke. Perhaps the arms of the twin spirits were untwined—and they went their separate ways smiling—the woman and the river.

When, after a short time, the old wife came out, dressed in fresh clothing, her white, starched tignon shining in the moonlight, to sit and talk with her husband, her composure was as perfect as that of the face of the water which in its serenity suggested the voice of the Master, when Peter would have sunk but for his word.

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

This was to be their last night here. Harold was to bring a carriage on the next day to take them to his mother and Blossom, and, despite the joy in their old hearts, it cost them a pang to contemplate going away. Every wood-pile seemed to hold a memory, each feature of the bank a tender association. Blucher lay sleeping beside them.

Israel spoke first.

“Hannah!” he said.

“What, Isrul?”

“I ready to go home to-night, Hannah. Marse Harol’ done come. We done finished our ’sponsibility—an’ de big river ’s a-flowin’ on to de sea—an’ settin’ heah, I ’magine I kin see Mis’ Aggie lookin’ down on us, an’ seem like she mought want to consult wid us arter our meetin’ wid Marse Harol’ an’ we passin’ Blossom along. What you say, Hannah?”

“I been tired, ole man, an’ ef we could ’a’ went las’ night, like you say, seem like I ’d ’a’ been ready—an’, of co’se, I ’m

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

ready now, ef Gord wills. Peace is on my sperit. Yit an' still, when we rests off a little an' studies freedom free-handed, we won't want to hasten along maybe. Ef we was to set heah an' wait till Gord calls us,—He ain't ap' to call us bofe together, an' dey 'd be lonesome days for the last one. But ef we goes 'long wid Marse Harol', he an' Blossom 'll be a heap o' comfort to de one what's left."

"Hannah!"

"Yas, Isrul."

"We 's a-settin' to-night close to de brink—ain't dat so?"

"Yas, Isrul."

"An' de deep waters is in sight, eh, Hannah?"

"Yas, Isrul."

"An' we heah it singin', ef we listen close, eh, Hannah?"

"Yas, Isrul."

"Well, don't let 's forgit it, dat 's all. Don't let 's forgit, when we turns our backs on dis swellin' tide, dat de river o' Jordan is jes befo' us, all de same—

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

an' it can't be long befo' our crossin'-time."

"Amen!" said the woman.

The moon shone full upon the great river, making a shimmering path of light from shore to shore, when the old couple slowly rose and went to rest.

Toward morning there was a quick gurgling sound in front of the cabin. Blucher caught it, and, springing out, barked at the stars. The sleepers within the levee hut slept on, being over-weary.

The watchman in the Carrollton garden heard the sound,—heard it swell almost to a roar,—and he ran to the new levee, reaching its summit just in time to see the roof of the cabin as it sank, with the entire point of land upon which it rested, into the greedy flood.

When Harold Le Duc arrived that morning to take the old people home, the river came to meet him at the brim of the near bank, and its face was as the face of smiling innocence.

THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

While he stood awe-stricken before the awful fact so tragically expressed in the river's bland denial, a wet dog came, and, whining, crouched at his feet. He barked softly, laid his head a moment upon his master's boot, moaned a sort of confidential note, and, looking into the air, barked again, softly.

Did he see more than he could tell? Was he trying to comfort his master? He had heard all the sweet converse of the old people on that last night, and perhaps he was saying in his poor best speech that all was well.

Mammy Hannah and Uncle Israel, having discharged their responsibility, had crossed the River together.

PART THIRD