

### THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

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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



PART THIRD

“Oh, it 's windy,  
Sweet Lucindy,  
On de river-bank to-night,  
An' de moontime  
Beats de noontime,  
When de trimblin' water 's white.”

SO runs the plantation love-song, and so sang a great brown fellow as, with oars over his shoulder, he strolled down “Lovers' Lane,” between the *bois d'ares*, toward the Mississippi levee.

He repeated it correctly until he neared the gourd-vine which marked the home of his lady, when he dropped his voice a bit and, eschewing rhyme for the greater value, sang:

“Oh, it 's windy,  
Sweet Maria,  
On de river-bank to-night—”

And slackening his pace until he heard



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footsteps behind him, he stopped and waited while a lithe yellow girl overtook him languidly.

"Heah, you take yo' sheer o' de load!" he laughed as he handed her one of the oars. "Better begin right. You tote half an' me half." And as she took the oar he added, "How is you to-night, anyhow, sugar-gal?"

While he put his right arm around her waist, having shifted the remaining oar to his left side, the girl instinctively bestowed the one she carried over her right shoulder, so that her left arm was free for reciprocity, to which it naïvely devoted itself.

"I tell yer, hit 's fine an' windy to-night, sho' enough," he said. "De breeze on de levee is fresh an' cool, an' de skift she 's got a new yaller-buff frock, an' she—"

"Which skift? De *Malviny*? Is you give her a fresh coat o' paint? An' dat 's my favoryte color—yaller-buff!" This with a chuckle.

"No; dey ain't no *Malviny* skift no

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mo'—not on dis plantation. I done changed her name."

"You is, is yer? What is you named her dis time?"

She was preparing to express surprise in the surely expected. Of course the boat was renamed the *Maria*. What else, in the circumstances?

"I painted her after a lady-frien's complexion, a bright, clair yaller; but as to de name—guess!" said the man, with a lunge toward the girl, as the oar he carried struck a tree—a lunge which brought him into position to touch her ear with his lips while he repeated: "What you reckon I named her, sweet-enin'?"

"How should I know? I ain't in yo' heart!"

"You ain't, ain't yer? Ef you ain't, I 'd like mighty well to know who is. You 's a reg'lar risidenter, you is—an' you knows it, too! Guess along, gal. What you think de boat 's named?"

"Well, ef you persises for me to



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guess, I'll say *Silv' Ann*. Dat's a purty title for a skift."

"*Silv' Ann!*" contemptuously. "I 'clare, M'ria, I b'lieve you 's jealous-hearted. No, indeedy! I know I run 'roun' wid *Silv' Ann* awhile back, jes to pass de time, but she can't name none o' my boats! No; ef you won't guess, I'll tell yer—dat is, I'll give you a hint. She named for my best gal! *Now guess!*"

"I never was no hand at guessin'." The girl laughed while she tossed her head. "Heah, take dis oah, man, an' lemme walk free. I ain't engaged to tote no half-load *yit*—as I knows on. Lordy, but dat heavy paddle done put my whole arm to sleep. Ouch! boy. Hands off tell de pins an' needles draps out. I sho' is glad to go rowin' on de water to-night."

So sure was she now of her lover, and of the honor which he tossed as a ball in his hands, never letting her quite see it, that she whimsically put away the subject.

She had been to school several sum-

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mers and could decipher a good many words, but most surely, from proud practice, she could spell her own name. As they presently climbed the levee together, she remarked, seeing the water: "Whar is de boat, anyhow—de What-you-may-call-it? She ain't in sight—not heah!"

"No; she's a little piece up de current—in de willer-clump. I did n't want nobody foolin' wid 'er—an' maybe readin' off my affairs. She got her new intitlemint painted on her stern—every letter a different color, to match de way her namesake treats me—in a new light every day."

The girl giggled foolishly. She seemed to see the contour of her own name, a bouquet of color reaching across the boat, and it pleased her. It would be a witness for her—to all who could read.

"I sho' does like boats an' water," she generalized, as they walked on.

"Me, too," agreed her lover; "but I likes anything—wid my chosen com-



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pany. What is dat whizzin' past my face? Look like a honey-bee."

"T is a honey-bee. Dey comes up heah on account o' de chiny-flowers. But look out! Dat 's another! You started 'em time you drug yo' oah in de mids' o' dem chiny-blossoms. Whenever de chiny-trees gits too sickenin' sweet, look out for de bees!"

"Yas," chuckled de man; "an' dey 's a lesson in dat, ef we 'd study over it. Whenever life gits too sweet, look out for trouble! But we won't worry 'bout dat to-night. Is you 'feared o' stingin' bees?"

"No, not whilst dey getherin' honey—dey too busy. Hit 's de idlers dat I shun. An' I ain't afeared o' trouble, nuther. Yit an' still, ef happiness is a sign, I better look sharp."

"Is you so happy, my Sugar?"

The girl laughed.

"I don't know ef I is or not—I mus' see de name on dat skiff befo' I can say. Take yo' han' off my wais', boy! Ef you don't I 'll be 'feared o' stingin' "

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bees, sho' enough! Don't make life *too* sweet!"

They were both laughing when the girl dashed ahead into the willow-clump, Love close at her heels, and in a moment the *Maria*, in her gleaming dress of yellow, darted out into the sunset.

A boat or two had preceded them, and another followed presently, but it takes money to own a skiff, or even to build one of the drift-wood, which is free to the captor. And so most of the couples who sought the river strolled for a short space, finding secluded seats on the rough-hewn benches between the acacia-trees or on the drift-dogs which lined the water's edge. It was too warm for continued walking.

From some of the smaller vessels, easily recognizable as of the same family as the fruit-luggers which crowd around "Picayune Tier" at the French market, there issued sweet songs in the soft Italian tongue, often accompanied by the accordeon.



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Young Love sang on the water in half a dozen tongues, as he sings there yet at every summer eventide.

The skiffs for the most part kept fairly close to the shore, skirting the strong current of the channel, avoiding, too, the large steamboats, whose passage ever jeopardized the small craft which crossed in their wake.

Indeed, the passage of one of these great "packets" generally cleared the midstream, although a few venturesome oarsmen would often dare fate in riding the billows in her wake. These great steamboats were known among the humble river folk more for their wave-making power than for the proud features which distinguished them in their personal relations.

There were those, for instance, who would watch for a certain great boat called the *Capitol*, just for the bravado of essaying the bubbling storm which followed her keel, while some who, enjoying their fun with less snap of danger, preferred to have their skiffs dance

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behind the *Laurel Hill*. Or perhaps it was the other way: it may have been the *Laurel Hill*, of the sphere-topped smoke-stacks, which made the more sensational passage.

It all happened a long time ago, although only about thirteen years had passed since the events last related, and both boats are dead. At least they are out of the world of action, and let us hope they have gone to their rest. An old hulk stranded ashore and awaiting final dissolution is ever a pathetic sight, suggesting a patient paralytic in his chair, grimly biding fate — the waters of eternity at his feet.

At intervals, this evening, fishermen alongshore — old negroes mostly — potted among the rafts, setting their lines, and if the oarsmen listened keenly, they might almost surely have caught from these gentle toilers short snatches of low-pitched song, hymns mostly, of content or rejoicing.

There was no sense of the fitness of the words when an ancient fisher sang



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"Sweet fields beyan' de swelling flood," or of humor in "How firm a foundation," chanted by one standing boot-deep in suspicious sands. The favorite hymn of several of the colored fishermen, however, seemed to be "Cometh our fount of every blessin'," frankly so pronounced with reverent piety.

At a distant end of his raft, hidden from its owner by a jutting point from which they leaped, naked boys waded and swam, jeering the deaf singer as they jeered each passing boat, while occasionally an adventurous fellow would dive quite under a skiff, seizing his opportunity while the oars were lifted.

None of the little rowboats carried sail as a rule, although sometimes a sloop would float by with an air of commanding a squadron of the sparse fleet which extended along the length of the river.

The sun was fallen nearly to the levee-line this evening when one of the finest of the "river palaces" hove in sight.

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The sky-hour for "dousing the great glim" was so near—and the actual setting of the sun is always sudden—that, while daylight still prevailed, all the steamer's lights were lit, and although the keen sun which struck her as a search-light robbed her thousand lamps of their value, the whole scene was greater for the full illumination.

The people along shore waved to the passing boat—they always do it—and the more amiable of the passengers answered with flying handkerchiefs.

As she loomed radiant before them, an aged negro, sitting mending his net, remarked to his companion:

"What do she look like to you, Br'er Jones?"

"What she look like to me?" The man addressed took his pipe from his lips at the question. "What she look like—to me?" he repeated again. "Why, tell the trufe, I was jes' study-in' 'bout dat when you spoke. She 'minds me o' Heaven; dat what she signifies to my eyes—Heavenly man-



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sions. What do she look like to you?"

"Well," the man shifted the quid in his mouth and lowered his shuttle as he said slowly, "well, to my observance, she don't answer for Heaven; I tell yer dat: not wid all dat black smoke risin' outen 'er 'bominable regions. She 's mo' like de yether place to *me*. She may have Heavenly gyarments on, but she got a hell breath, sho'. An' listen at de band o' music playin' devil-dance time inside her! An' when she choose to let it out, she 's got a-a-nawful snort—she sho' is!"

"Does you mean de cali-ope?"

"No; she ain't got no cali-ope. I means her clair whistle. Hit 's got a jedgment-day sound in it to my ears."

"Dat music you heah', dat ain't no dance-music. She plays dat for de passengers to eat by, so dey tell me. But I reckon dey jes p'onounces supper dat-a-way, same as you 'd ring a bell. An' when de people sets down to de table, dey mus' sho'ly have de man-

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ners to stop long enough to let 'em eat in peace. Yit an' still, whilst she looks like Heaven, I 'd a heap ruther set heah an' see her go by 'n to put foot in her, 'ca'se I 'd look for her to 'splode out de minute I landed in her an' to scatter my body in one direction an' my soul somewhars else. No; even ef she was Heaven, I 'd ruther 'speriment heah a little longer, settin' on de sof' grass an' smellin' de yearnin' trees an' listenin' at de bumblebees a-bumblin', an' go home an' warm up my bacon an' greens for supper, an' maybe go out foragin' for my Sunday chicken to-night in de dark o' de moon. Hyah! My stomach hit rings de dinner-bell for me, jes as good as a brass ban'."

"Me, too!" chuckled the smoker. "I 'll take my chances on dry lan', every time. I know I 'll niver lead a p'ocession but once-t, and dat 'll be at my own fun'al, an' I don't inten' to resk my chances. But she is sho' one noble-lookin' boat."

By this time the great steamboat—



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the wonderful apparition so aptly typifying Heaven and hell—had passed.

She carried only the usual number of passengers, but at this evening hour they crowded the guards, making a brilliant showing. Family parties they were mostly, with here and there groups of young folk, generally collected about some popular girl who formed a center around which coquetry played mirthfully in the breeze. A piquant Arcadian bride, "pretty as red shoes," artlessly appearing in all her white wedding toggery, her veil almost crushed by its weight of artificial orange-flowers, looked stoically away from the little dark husband who persisted in fanning her vigorously, while they sat in the sun-filled corner which they had taken for its shade while the boat was turned into the landing to take them aboard. And, of course, there was the usual quota of staid couples who had survived this interesting stage of life's game.

Nor was exhibition of rather intimate domesticity entirely missing. Infancy

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dined in Nature's own way, behind the doubtful screening of waving palmetto fans. While among the teething and whooping-cough contingents the observer of life might have found both tragedy and comedy for his delectation.

Mild, submissive mothers of families, women of the creole middle class mainly,—old and withered at thirty-five, all their youthful magnolia tints gone wrong, as in the flower when its bloom is passed—exchanged maternal experiences, and agreed without dissent that the world was full of trouble, but "God was good."

Even a certain slight maternal wisp who bent over a tiny waxen thing upon her lap, dreading each moment to perceive the flicker in her breath which would show that a flame went out—even she, poor tear-dimmed soul, said it while she answered sympathetic inquiry:

"Oh, yas; it is for her we are taking de trip. Yas, she is very sick, *mais God is good*. It is de eye-teet'. De



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river's breath it is de bes' medicine. De doctor he prescribe it. An' my father he had las' winter such a so much trouble to work his heart, an' so, seeing we were coming, he is also here — yas, dat 's heem yonder, asleep. 'Tis his most best sleep for a year, lying so. De river she give it. An' dose ferry-boat dey got always on board too much whooping-cough to fasten on to eye-teet."

Somewhat apart from the other passengers, their circle loosely but surely defined by the irregular setting of their chairs toward a common center, sat a group, evidently of the great world—most conspicuous among them a distinguished-looking couple in fresh mid-life, who led the animated discussion, and who were seen often to look in the direction of a tall and beautiful girl who stood in the midst of a circle of young people within easy call. It was impossible not to see that their interest in the girl was vital, for they often ex-

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changed glances when her laughter filled the air, and laughed with her, although they knew only that she had laughed.

The girl stood well in sight, although "surrounded six deep" by an adoring crowd; nor was this attributable alone to her height which set her fine little head above most of her companions. A certain distinction of manner—unrelated to haughtiness, which may fail in effect, or arrogance, which may override but never appeal; perhaps it was a graciousness of bearing—kept her admirers ever at a tasteful distance.

There was an ineffable charm about the girl, a thing apart from the unusual beauty which marked her in any gathering of which she became a part.

Descriptions are hazardous and available words often inadequate to the veracious presentment of beauty, and yet there is ever in perfection a challenge to the pen.

As the maiden stood this evening in the sunlight, her radiant yellow hair



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complementing the blue of her sea-deep eyes, her fair cheeks aglow, and one color melting to another in her quick movements, the effect was almost like an iridescence. Tender in tints as a sea-shell, there might have been danger of lapse into insipidity but for the accent of dark rims and curled lashes which individualized the eyes, and, too, the strong, straight lines of her contour, which, more than the note of dark color, marked her a Le Duc.

There are some women who naturally hold court, no matter what the conditions of life, and to whom tribute comes as naturally as the air they breathe. It often dates back into their spelling-class days, and I am not sure that it does not occasionally begin in the "perambulator."

This magnetic quality—one hesitates to use an expression so nervously prostrated by strenuous overwork, and yet it is well made and to hand—this magnetic quality, then, was probably, in Agnes Le Duc, the gift of the Latin

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strain grafted upon New England sturdiness and reserve, the one answering, as one might say, for ballast, while the other lent sail for the equable poising of a safe and brilliant life-craft.

So, also, was her unusual beauty markedly a composite and of elements so finely contrasting that their harmonizing seemed rather a succession of flashes, as of opposite electric currents meeting and breaking through the caprice of temperamental disturbance; as in the smile which won by its witchery, or the illumination with which rapid thought or sudden pity kindled her eye.

Educated alternately in Louisiana where she had recited her history lessons in French, and in New England, the pride and pet of a charmed Cambridge circle, with occasional trips abroad with her "parents," she was emerging, all unknowingly, a rather exceptional young woman for any place or time.

Seeing her this evening, an enthusiast might have likened her to the exquisite



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bud of a great tea-rose, regal on a slender stem—shy of unfolding, yet ultimately unafraid, even through the dewy veil of immaturity—knowing full well, though she might not stop to remember, the line of court roses in her pedigree.

Watching her so at a safe distance, one could not help wondering that she thought it worth her while to listen at all, seeing how her admirers waited upon her every utterance. To listen well has long been considered a grace—just to listen; but there is a still higher art, perhaps, in going a step beyond. It is to listen with enthusiasm, yes, even with *eloquence*. One having a genius for this sort of oratory, speaking through the inspired utterance of another, and of course supplying the inspiration, gains easily the reputation of “delightful conversational powers.”

And this was precisely an unsuspected quality which made for the sweet girl much of the popularity which

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she had never analyzed or questioned. She *could* talk, and in several languages, familiarly, and when the invitation arrived, she did—upward, with respect, to her elders (she had learned that both in New Orleans and in Boston); downward to her inferiors—with gentle directness, unmixed with overcondescension; to right and to left among her companions, quite as a free-hearted girl, with spirit and *camaraderie*.

A quality, this, presaging social success certainly, and, it must be admitted, it is a quality which sometimes adorns natures wanting in depth of affection. That this was not true of Agnes Le Duc, however, seems to be clearly shown in an incident of this trip.

As she stood with her companions this evening, while one and another commented upon this or that feature of the shore, they came suddenly upon a congregation of negroes encircling an inlet between two curves in the levee, and, as the low sun shone clearly into