

## IX

MARGARET

THE Major was in town and Miss Lucy had gone to spend the day with a neighbor; so Chad was left alone.

"Look aroun', Chad, and see how you like things," said the Major. "Go anywhere you please."

And Chad looked around. He went to the barn to see his old mare and the Major's horses, and to the kennels, where the fox-hounds reared against the palings and sniffed at him curiously; he strolled about the quarters, where the little pick-aninnies were playing, and out to the fields, where the servants were at work under the overseer, Jerome Conners, a tall, thin man with shrewd eyes, a sour, sullen face, and protruding upper teeth. One of the few smiles that ever came to that face came now when the overseer saw the little mountaineer. By and by Chad got one of the "hands" to let him take hold of the plough and go once around the field, and the boy handled the plough like a veteran, so that the others watched him, and the negro grinned, when he came back, and said:

"You sutinly can plough fer a fac'!"

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He was lonesome by noon and had a lonely dinner, during which he could scarcely realize that it was really he—Chad—Chad sitting up at the table alone and being respectfully waited on by a kinky-headed little negro girl—called Thanky-ma'am because she was born on Thanksgiving day—and he wondered what the Turners would think if they could see him now—and the school-master. Where was the school-master? He began to be sorry that he hadn't gone to town to try to find him. Perhaps the Major would see him—but how would the Major know the school-master? He was sorry he hadn't gone. After dinner he started out-doors again. Earth and sky were radiant with light. Great white tumbling clouds were piled high all around the horizon—and what a long length of sky it was in every direction! Down in the mountains, he had to look straight up, sometimes, to see the sky at all. Blackbirds chattered in the cedars as he went to the yard gate. The field outside was full of singing meadow-larks, and crows were cawing in the woods beyond. There had been a light shower, and on the dead top of a tall tree he saw a buzzard stretching his wings out to the sun. Past the edge of the woods, ran a little stream with banks that were green to the very water's edge, and Chad followed it on through the woods, over a worm rail-fence, along a sprouting wheat-field, out into a pasture in which

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sheep and cattle were grazing, and on, past a little hill, where, on the next low slope, sat a great white house with big white pillars, and Chad climbed on top of the stone fence—and sat, looking. On the portico stood a tall man in a slouch hat and a lady in black. At the foot of the steps a boy—a head taller than Chad perhaps—was rigging up a fishing-pole. A negro boy was leading a black pony toward the porch, and, to his dying day, Chad never forgot the scene that followed. For, the next moment, a little figure in a long riding-skirt stood in the big doorway and then ran down the steps, while a laugh, as joyous as the water running at his feet, floated down the slope to his ears. He saw the negro stoop, the little girl bound lightly to her saddle; he saw her black curls shake in the sunlight, again the merry laugh tinkled in his ears, and then, with a white plume nodding from her black cap, she galloped off and disappeared among the trees; and Chad sat looking after her—thrilled, mysteriously thrilled—mysteriously saddened, straightway. Would he ever see her again?

The tall man and the lady in black went in-doors, the negro disappeared, and the boy at the foot of the steps kept on rigging his pole. Several times voices sounded under the high creek bank below him, but, quick as his ears were, Chad did not hear them. Suddenly there was a cry that startled him,

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and something flashed in the sun over the edge of the bank and flopped in the grass.

"Snowball!" an imperious young voice called below the bank, "get that fish!"

On the moment Chad was alert again—somebody was fishing down there—and he sprang from his perch and ran toward the fish just as a woolly head and a jet-black face peeped over the bank.

The pickaninny's eyes were stretched wide when he saw the strange figure in coonskin cap and moccasins running down on him, his face almost blanched with terror, and he loosed his hold and, with a cry of fright, rolled back out of sight. Chad looked over the bank. A boy of his own age was holding another pole, and, hearing the little darky slide down, he said, sharply:

"Get that fish, I tell you!"

"Look dar, Mars' Dan, look dar!"

The boy looked around and up and stared with as much wonder as his little body-servant, but with no fear.

"Howdye!" said Chad; but the white boy stared on silently.

"Fishin'?" said Chad.

"Yes," said Dan, shortly—he had shown enough curiosity and he turned his eyes to his cork. "Get that fish, Snowball," he said again.

"I'll git him fer ye," Chad said; and he went to the fish and unhooked it and came down the bank

with the perch in one hand and the pole in the other.

"Whar's yo' string?" he asked, handing the pole to the still trembling little darky.

"I'll take it," said Dan, sticking the butt of his cane-pole in the mud. The fish slipped through his wet fingers, when Chad passed it to him, dropped on the bank, flopped to the edge of the creek, and the three boys, with the same cry, scrambled for it—Snowball falling down on it and clutching it in both his black little paws.

"Dar now!" he shrieked. "I got him!"

"Give him to me," said Dan.

"Lemme string him," said the black boy.

"Give him to me, I tell you!" And, stringing the fish, Dan took the other pole and turned his eyes to his corks, while the pickaninny squatted behind him and Chad climbed up and sat on the bank—letting his legs dangle over. When Dan caught a fish he would fling it with a whoop high over the bank. After the third fish, the lad was mollified and got over his ill-temper. He turned to Chad:

"Want to fish?"

Chad sprang down the bank quickly.

"Yes," he said, and he took the other pole out of the bank, put on a fresh wriggling worm, and moved a little farther down the creek where there was an eddy.

"Ketchin' any?" said a voice above the bank,

and Chad looked up to see still another lad, taller by a head than either he or Dan—evidently the boy whom he had seen rigging a pole up at the big house on the hill.

"Oh, 'bout 'leven," said Dan, carelessly.

"Howdye!" said Chad.

"Howdye!" said the other boy, and he, too, stared curiously, but Chad had got used to people staring at him.

"I'm goin' over the big rock," added the new arrival, and he went down the creek and climbed around a steep little cliff, and out on a huge rock that hung over the creek, where he dropped his hook. He had no cork, and Chad knew that he was trying to catch catfish. Presently he jerked, and a yellow mudcat rose to the surface, fighting desperately for his life, and Dan and Snowball yelled crazily. Then Dan pulled out a perch.

"I got another one," he shouted. And Chad fished silently. They were making "a mighty big fuss," he thought, "over mighty little fish. If he just had a minnow an' had 'em down in the mountains, 'I Gonnies, he'd show 'em what fishin' was!" But he began to have good luck as it was. Perch after perch he pulled out quietly, and he kept Snowball busy stringing them until he had five on the string. The boy on the rock was watching him and so was the boy near him—furtively—while Snowball's admiration was won completely, and he

grinned and gurgled his delight, until Dan lost his temper again and spoke to him sharply. Dan did not like to be beaten at anything. Pretty soon there was a light thunder of hoofs on the turf above the bank. A black pony shot around the bank and was pulled in at the edge of the ford, and Chad was looking into the dancing black eyes of a little girl with a black velvet cap on her dark curls and a white plume waving from it.

"Howdye!" said Chad, and his heart leaped curiously, but the little girl did not answer. She, too, stared at him as all the others had done and started to ride into the creek, but Dan stopped her sharply:

"Now, Margaret, don't you ride into that water. You'll skeer the fish."

"No, you won't," said Chad, promptly. "Fish don't keer nothin' about a hoss." But the little girl stood still, and her brother's face flushed. He resented the stranger's interference and his assumption of a better knowledge of fish.

"Mind your own business," trembled on his tongue, and the fact that he held the words back only served to increase his ill-humor and make a worse outbreak possible. But, if Chad did not understand, Snowball did, and his black face grew suddenly grave as he sprang more alertly than ever at any word from his little master. Meanwhile, all unconscious, Chad fished on, catching

perch after perch, but he could not keep his eyes on his cork while the little girl was so near, and more than once he was warned by a suppressed cry from the pickaninny when to pull. Once, when he was putting on a worm, he saw the little girl watching the process with great disgust, and he remembered that Melissa would never bait her own hook. All girls were alike, he "reckoned" to himself, and when he caught a fish that was unusually big, he walked over to her.

"I'll give this un to you," he said, but she shrank from it.

"Go 'way!" she said, and she turned her pony. Dan was red in the face by this time. How did this piece of poor white trash dare to offer a fish to his sister? And this time the words came out like the crack of a whip:

"S'pose you mind your own business!"

Chad started as though he had been struck and looked around quickly. He said nothing, but he stuck the butt of his pole in the mud at once and climbed up on the bank again and sat there, with his legs hanging over; and his own face was not pleasant to see. The little girl was riding at a walk up the road. Chad kept perfect silence, for he realized that he had not been minding his own business; still he did not like to be told so and in such a way. Both corks were shaking at the same time now.

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"You got a bite," said Dan, but Chad did not move.

"You got a bite, I tell you," he said, in almost the tone he had used to Snowball, but Chad, when the small aristocrat looked sharply around, dropped his elbows to his knees and his chin into his hand—taking no notice. Once he spat dexterously into the creek. Dan's own cork was going under:

"Snowball!" he cried—"jerk!" A fish flew over Chad's head. Snowball had run for the other pole at command and jerked, too, but the fish was gone and with it the bait.

"You lost that fish!" said the boy, hotly, but Chad sat silent—still. If he would only say something! Dan began to think that the stranger was a coward. So presently, to show what a great little man he was, he began to tease Snowball, who was up on the bank unhooking the fish, of which Chad had taken no notice.

"What's your name?"

"Snowball!" shouted the black little henchman, obediently.

"Louder!"

"S-n-o-w-b-a-l-l!"

"Louder!" The little black fellow opened his mouth wide.

"S-N-O-W-B-A-L-L!" he shrieked.

"LOUDER!"

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At last Chad spoke—quietly.

"He can't holler no louder."

"What do you know about it? Louder!" and Dan started menacingly after the little ducky: but Chad stepped between.

"Don't hit him!"

Now Dan had never struck Snowball in his life, and he would as soon have struck his own brother—but he must not be told that he couldn't. His face flamed and little Hotspur that he was, he drew his fist back and hit Chad full in the chest. Chad leaped back to avoid the blow, tumbling Snowball down the bank; the two clinched, and, while they tussled, Chad heard the other brother clambering over the rocks, the beat of hoofs coming toward him on the turf, and the little girl's cry:

"Don't you *dare* touch my brother!"

Both went down side by side with their heads just hanging over the bank, where both could see Snowball's black wool coming to the surface in the deep hole, and both heard his terrified shriek as he went under again. Chad was first to his feet.

"Git a rail!" he shouted and plunged in, but Dan sprang in after him. In three strokes, for the current was rather strong, Chad had the kinky wool in his hand, and, in a few strokes more, the two boys had Snowball gasping on the bank. Harry, the taller brother, ran forward to help them carry him up the bank, and they laid him, choking

and bawling, on the grass. Whip in one hand and with the skirt of her long black riding-habit in the other, the little girl stood above, looking on—white and frightened. The hullabaloo had reached the house and General Dean was walking swiftly down the hill, with Snowball's mammy, topped by a red bandanna handkerchief, rushing after him and the kitchen servants following.

"What does this mean?" he said, sternly, and Chad was in a strange awe at once—he was so tall, and he stood so straight, and his eye was so piercing. Few people could lie into that eye. The little girl spoke first—usually she does speak first, as well as last.

"Dan and—and—that boy were fighting and they pushed Snowball into the creek."

"Dan was teasin' Snowball," said Harry the just.

"And that boy meddled," said Dan.

"Who struck first?" asked the General, looking from one boy to the other. Dan dropped his eyes sullenly and Chad did not answer.

"I wasn't goin' to hit Snowball," said Dan.

"I thought you wus," said Chad.

"Who struck first?" repeated the General, looking at Dan now.

"That boy meddled and I hit him."

Chad turned and answered the General's eyes steadily.

"I reckon I had no business meddlin'!"

"He tried to give sister a fish."

That was unwise in Dan—Margaret's chin lifted.

"Oh," she said, "that was it, too, was it? Well——"

"I didn't see no harm givin' the little gal a fish," said Chad. "Little gal," indeed! Chad lost the ground he might have gained. Margaret's eyes looked all at once like her father's.

"I'm a little *girl*, thank you."

Chad turned to her father now, looking him in the face straight and steadily.

"I reckon I had no business meddlin', but I didn't think hit was fa'r fer him to hit the nigger; the nigger was littler, an' I didn't think hit was 'right.'"

"I didn't mean to hit him—I was only playin'!"

"But I *thought* you was goin' to hit him," said Chad. He looked at the General again. "But I had no business meddlin'." And he picked up his old coonskin cap from the grass to start away.

"Hold on, little man," said the General.

"Dan, haven't I told you not to tease Snowball?" Dan dropped his eyes again.

"Yes, sir."

"You struck first, and this boy says he oughtn't to have meddled, but I think he did just right. Have you anything to say to him?" Dan worked the toe of his left boot into the turf for a moment.

"No, sir."

"Well, go up to your room and think about it awhile and see if you don't owe somebody an apology. Hurry up now an' change your clothes. You'd better come up to the house and get some dry clothes for yourself, my boy," he added to Chad. "You'll catch cold."

"Much obleeged," said Chad. "But I don't ketch cold."

He put on his old coonskin cap, and then the General recognized him.

"Why, aren't you the little boy who bought a horse from me in town the other day?" And then Chad recognized him as the tall man who had cried out:

"Let him have her."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I know all about you," said the General, kindly. "You are staying with Major Buford. He's a great friend and neighbor of mine. Now you must come up and get some clothes, Harry!" —But Chad, though he hesitated, for he knew now that the gentleman had practically given him the old mare, interrupted, sturdily,

"No, sir, I can't go—not while he's a-feelin' hard at me."

"Very well," said the General, gravely. Chad started off on a trot and stopped suddenly.

"I wish you'd please tell that little *gurl*"—

Chad pronounced the word with some difficulty—"that I didn't mean nothin' callin' her a little gal. Ever'body calls gurls gals whar I come from."

"All right," laughed the General. Chad trotted all the way home and there Miss Lucy made him take off his wet clothes at once, though the boy had to go to bed while they were drying, for he had no other clothes, and while he lay in bed the Major came up and listened to Chad's story of the afternoon, which Chad told him word for word just as it had all happened.

"You did just right, Chad," said the Major, and he went down the stairs, chuckling:

"Wouldn't go in and get dry clothes because Dan wouldn't apologize. Dear me! I reckon they'll have it out when they see each other again. I'd like to be on hand, and I'd bet my bottom dollar on Chad." But they did not have it out. Half an hour after supper somebody shouted "Hello!" at the gate, and the Major went out and came back smiling.

"Somebody wants to see you, Chad," he said. And Chad went out and found Dan there on the black pony with Snowball behind him.

"I've come over to say that I had no business hittin' you down at the creek, and—" Chad interrupted him:

"That's all right," he said, and Dan stopped

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and thrust out his hand. The two boys shook hands gravely.

"An' my papa says you are a man an' he wants you to come over and see us and I want you—and Harry and Margaret. We all want you."

"All right," said Chad. Dan turned his black pony and galloped off.

"An' come soon!" he shouted back.

Out in the quarters Mammy Ailsie, old Tom's wife, was having her own say that night.

"Ole Marse Cal Buford pickin' a piece o' white trash out de gutter an' not sayin' whar he come from an' nuttin' 'bout him. An' old Mars Henry takin' him jus' like he was quality. My Tom say dat boy don' know who is his mammy ner his daddy. I ain' gwine to let my little mistis play wid no sech trash, I tell you—'deed I ain't!" And this talk would reach the drawing-room by and by, where the General was telling the family, at just about the same hour, the story of the horse sale and Chad's purchase of the old brood mare.

"I knew where he was from right away," said Harry. "I've seen mountain-people wearing caps like his up at Uncle Brutus's, when they come down to go to Richmond."

The General frowned.

"Well, you won't see any more people like him up there again."

"Why, papa?"

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"Because you aren't going to Uncle Brutus's any more."

"Why, papa?"

The mother put her hand on her husband's knee.

"Never mind, son," she said.