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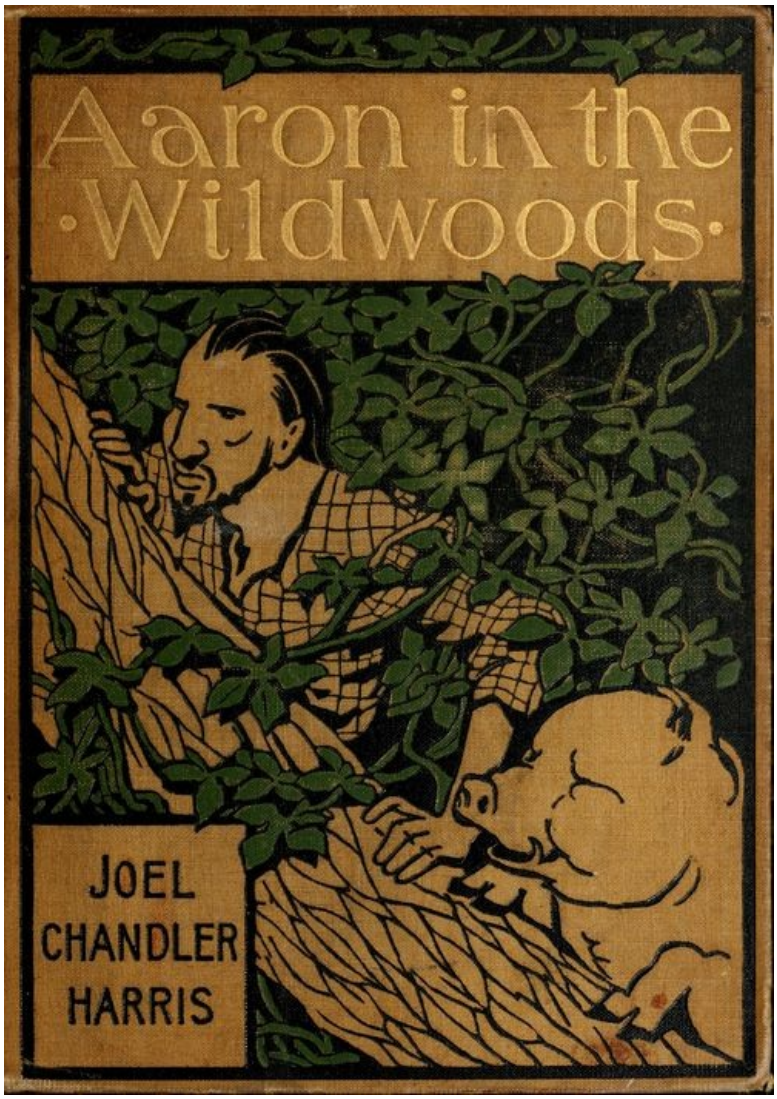

MR. COON INSISTED ON GADDING ABOUT. (Page 46)

Aaron in the Wildwoods

BY

JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS

AUTHOR OF "UNCLE REMUS," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY OLIVER HERFORD

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Aaron in the Wildwoods.

Prelude.

I.

Once upon a time there lived on a large plantation in Middle Georgia a boy who was known as Little Crotchet. It was a very queer name, to be sure, but it seemed to fit the lad to a T. When he was a wee bit of a chap he fell seriously ill, and when, many weeks afterwards, the doctors said the worst was over, it was found that he had lost the use of his legs, and that he would never be able to run about and play as other children do. When he was told about this he laughed, and said he had known all along that he would never be able to run about on his feet again; but he had plans of his own, and he told his father that he wanted a pair of crutches made.

"But you can't use them, my son," said his father.

"Anyhow, I can try," insisted the lad.

The doctors were told of his desire, and these wise men put their heads together.

"It is a crotchet," they declared, "but it will be no harm for him to try."

"It is a little crotchet," said his mother, "and he shall have the crutches."

Thus it came about that the lad got both his name and his crutches, for his father insisted on calling him Little Crotchet after that, and he also insisted on sending all the way to Philadelphia for the crutches. They seemed to be a long time in coming, for in those days they had to be brought to Charleston in a sailing vessel, and then sent by way of Augusta in a stage-coach; but when they came they were very welcome, for Little Crotchet had been inquiring for them every day in the week, and Sunday too. And yet when they came, strange to say, he seemed to have lost his interest in them. His mother brought them in joyously, but there was not even a glad smile on the lad's face. He looked at them gravely, weighed them in his hands, laid them across the foot of the bed, and then turned his head on his pillow, as if he wanted to go to sleep. His mother was surprised, and not a little hurt, as mothers will be when they do not understand their children; but she respected his wishes, darkened the room, kissed her boy, and closed the door gently.

When everything was still, Little Crotchet sat up in bed, seized his crutches, and proceeded to try them. He did this every day for a week, and at the end of that time surprised everybody in the house, and on the place as well, by marching out on his crutches, and going from room to room without so much as touching his feet to the floor. It seemed to be a most wonderful feat to perform, and so it was; but Providence, in depriving the lad of the use of his legs, had correspondingly strengthened the muscles of his chest and arms, so that within a month he could use his crutches almost as nimbly and quite as safely as other boys use their feet. He could go upstairs and downstairs and walk about the place with as much ease, apparently, as those not afflicted, and it was not strange that the negroes regarded the performance with wonder akin to awe, declaring among themselves that their young master was upheld and supported by "de sperits."

And indeed it was a queer sight to see the frail lad going boldly about on crutches, his feet not touching the ground. The sight seemed to make the pet name of Little Crotchet more appropriate than ever. So his name stuck to him, even after he got his Gray Pony, and became a familiar figure in town and in country, as he went galloping about, his crutches strapped to the saddle, and dangling as gayly as the sword of some fine general. Thus it came to pass that no one was surprised when Little Crotchet went cantering along, his Gray Pony snorting fiercely, and seeming never to tire. Early or late, whenever the neighbors heard the short, sharp snort of the Gray Pony and the rattling of the crutches, they would turn to one another and say, "Little Crotchet!" and that would be explanation enough. There seemed to be some sort of understanding between him and his Gray Pony.

Anybody could ride the Gray Pony in the pasture or in the grove around the house, but when it came to going out by the big gate, that was another matter. He could neither be led nor driven beyond that boundary by any one except Little Crotchet. It was the same when it came to crossing water. The Gray Pony would not cross over the smallest running brook for any one but Little Crotchet; but with the lad on his back he would plunge into the deepest stream, and, if need be, swim across it. All this deepened and confirmed in the minds of the negroes the idea that Little Crotchet was upheld and protected by "de sperits." They had heard him talking to the Gray Pony, and they had heard the Gray Pony whinny in reply. They had seen the Gray Pony with their little master on his back go gladly out at the big gate and rush with a snort through the plantation creek,—a bold and at times a dangerous stream. Seeing these things, and knowing the temper of the pony, they had no trouble in coming to the conclusion that something supernatural was behind it all.

II.

Thus it happened that Little Crotchet and his Gray Pony were pretty well known through all the country-side, for it seemed that he was never tired of riding, and that the pony was never tired of going. What was the rider's errand? Nobody knew. Why should he go skimming along the red road at day dawn? And why should he come whirling back at dusk,—a red cloud of dust rising beneath the Gray Pony's feet? Nobody could tell.

This was almost as much of a puzzle to some of the whites as it was to the negroes; but this mystery, if it could be called such, was soon eclipsed by a phenomenon that worried some of the wisest dwellers in that region. This phenomenon, apparently very simple, began to manifest itself in early fall, and continued all through that season and during the winter and on through the spring, until warm weather set in. It was in the shape of a thin column of blue smoke that could be seen on any clear morning or late afternoon rising from the centre of Spivey's Canebrake. This place was called a canebrake because a thick, almost impenetrable, growth of canes fringed the edge of a mile-wide basin lying between the bluffs of the Oconee River and the uplands beyond. Instead of being a canebrake it was a vast swamp, the site of cool but apparently stagnant ponds and of treacherous quagmires, in which cows, and even horses, had been known to disappear and perish. The cowitch grew there, and the yellow plumes of the poison-oak vine glittered like small torches. There, too, the thunder-wood tree exuded its poisonous milk, and long serpent-like vines wound themselves around and through the trees, and helped to shut out the sunlight. It was a swamp, and a very dismal one. The night birds gathered there to sleep during the day, and all sorts of creatures that shunned the sunlight or hated man found a refuge there. If the negroes had made paths through its recesses to enable them to avoid the patrol, nobody knew it but themselves.

Why, then, should a thin but steady stream of blue smoke be constantly rising upwards from the centre of Spivey's Canebrake? It was a mystery to those who first discovered it, and it soon grew to be a neighborhood mystery. During the summer the smoke could not be seen, but in the fall and winter its small thin volume went curling upward continually. Little Crotchet often watched it from the brow of Turner's Hill, the highest part of the uplands. Early in the morning or late in the afternoon the vapor would rise from the Oconee; but the vapor was white and heavy, and was blown about by the wind, while the smoke in the swamp was blue and thin, and rose straight in the air above the tops of the trees in spite of the wayward winds.

Once when Little Crotchet was sitting on his pony watching the blue smoke rise from the swamp he saw two of the neighbor farmers coming along the highway. They stopped and shook hands with the lad, and then turned to watch the thin stream of blue smoke. The morning was clear and still, and the smoke rose straight in the air, until it seemed to mingle with the upper blue. The two farmers were father and son,—Jonathan Gadsby and his son Ben. They were both very well acquainted with Little Crotchet,—as, indeed, everybody in the county was,—and he was so bright and queer that they stood somewhat in awe of him.

"I reckin if I had a pony that wasn't afeard of nothin' I'd go right straight and find out where that fire is, and what it is," remarked Ben Gadsby.

This stirred his father's ire apparently. "Why, Benjamin! Why, what on the face of the earth do you mean? Ride into that swamp! Why, you must have lost what little sense you had when you was born! I remember, jest as well as if it was day before yesterday, when Uncle Jimmy Cosby's red steer got in that swamp, and we couldn't git him out. Git him out, did I say? We couldn't even git nigh him. We could hear him beller, but we never got where we could see ha'r nor hide of him. If I was thirty year younger I'd take my foot in my hand and wade in there and see where the smoke comes from."

IT WAS A SWAMP

Little Crotchet laughed. "If I had two good legs," said he, "I'd soon see what the trouble is."

This awoke Ben Gadsby's ambition. "I believe I'll go in there and see where the fire is."

"Fire!" exclaimed old Mr. Gadsby, with some irritation. "Who said anything about fire? What living and moving creetur could build a fire in that thicket? I'd like mighty well to lay my eyes on him."

"Well," said Ben Gadsby, "where you see smoke there's obliged to be fire. I've heard you say that yourself."

"Me?" exclaimed Mr. Jonathan Gadsby, with a show of alarm in the midst of his indignation. "Did I say that? Well, it was when I wasn't so much as thinking that my two eyes were my own. What about foxfire? Suppose that some quagmire or other in that there swamp has gone and got up a ruction on its own hook? Smoke without fire? Why, I've seed it many a time. And maybe that smoke comes from an eruption in the ground. What then? Who's going to know where the fire is?"

Little Crotchet laughed, but Ben Gadsby put on a very bold front. "Well," said he, "I can find bee-trees, and I'll find where that fire is."

"Well, sir," remarked Mr. Jonathan Gadsby, looking at his son with an air of pride, "find out where the smoke comes from, and we'll not expect you to see the fire."

"I wish I could go with you," said Little Crotchet.

"I don't need any company," replied Ben Gadsby. "I've done made up my mind, and I a-going to show the folks around here that where there's so much smoke there's obliged to be some fire."

The young man, knowing that he had some warm work before him, pulled off his coat, and tied the sleeves over his shoulder, sash fashion. Then he waved his hand to his father and to Little Crotchet, and went rapidly down the hill. He had undertaken the adventure in a spirit of bravado. He knew that a number of the neighbors had tried to solve the mystery of the smoke in the swamp and had failed. He thought, too, that he would fail; and yet he was urged on by the belief that if he should happen to succeed, all the boys and all the girls in the neighborhood would regard him as a wonderful young man. He had the same ambition that animated the knight of old, but on a smaller scale.

III.

Now it chanced that Little Crotchet himself was on his way to the smoke in the swamp. He had been watching it, and wondering whether he should go to it by the path he knew, or whether he should go by the road that Aaron, the runaway, had told him of. Ben Gadsby interfered with his plans somewhat; for quite by accident, young Gadsby as he went down the hill struck into the path that Little Crotchet knew. There was a chance to gallop along the brow of the hill, turn to the left, plunge through a shallow lagoon, and strike into the path ahead of Gadsby, and this chance Little Crotchet took. He waved his hand to Mr. Jonathan Gadsby, gave the Gray Pony the rein, and went galloping through the underbrush, his crutches rattling, and the rings of the bridle-bit jingling. To Mr. Jonathan Gadsby it seemed that the lad was riding recklessly, and he groaned and shook his head as he turned and went on his way.

But Little Crotchet rode on. Turning sharply to the left as soon as he got out of sight, he went plunging through the lagoon, and was soon going along the blind path a quarter of a mile ahead of Ben Gadsby. This is why young Gadsby was so much disturbed that he lost his way. He was bold enough when he started out, but by the time he had descended the hill and struck into what he thought was a cattle-path his courage began to fail him. The tall canes seemed to bend above him in a threatening manner. The silence oppressed him. Everything was so still that the echo of his own movements as he brushed along the narrow path seemed to develop into ominous whispers, as if all the goblins he had ever heard of had congregated in front of him to bar his way.

The silence, with its strange echoes, was bad enough, but when he heard the snorting of Little Crotchet's Gray Pony as it plunged through the lagoon, the rattle of the crutches and the jingling of the bridle-bit, he fell into a panic. What great beast could it be that went helter-skelter through this dark and silent swamp, swimming through the water and tearing through the quagmires? And yet, when Ben Gadsby would have turned back, the rank undergrowth and the trailing vines had quite obscured the track. The fear that impelled him to retrace his steps was equally powerful in impelling him to go forward. And this seemed the easiest plan. He felt that it would be just as safe to go on, having once made the venture, as to turn back. He had a presentiment that he would never find his way out anyhow, and the panic he was in nerved him to the point of desperation.

So on he went, not always trying to follow the path, but plunging forward aimlessly. In half an hour he was calmer, and pretty soon he found the ground firm under his feet. His instincts as a bee-hunter came back to him. He had started in from the east side, and he paused to take his bearings. But it was hard to see the sun, and in the recesses of the swamp the mosses grew on all sides of the trees. And yet there was a difference, which Ben Gadsby did not fail to discover and take account of. They grew thicker and larger on the north side, and remembering this, he went forward with more confidence.

He found that the middle of the swamp was comparatively dry. Huge poplar-trees stood ranged about, the largest he had ever seen. In the midst of a group of trees he found one that was

hollow, and in this hollow he found the smouldering embers of a fire. But for the strange silence that surrounded him he would have given a whoop of triumph; but he restrained himself. Bee-hunter that he was, he took his coat from his shoulders and tied it around a small slim sapling standing near the big poplar where he had found the fire. It was his way when he found a bee-tree. It was a sort of guide. In returning he would take the general direction, and then hunt about until he found his coat; and it was much easier to find a tree tagged with a coat than it was to find one not similarly marked.

Thus, instead of whooping triumphantly, Ben Gadsby simply tied his coat about the nearest sapling, nodding his head significantly as he did so. He had unearthed the secret and unraveled the mystery, and now he would go and call in such of the neighbors as were near at hand and show them what a simple thing the great mystery was. He knew that he had found the hiding-place of Aaron, the runaway. So he fixed his "landmark," and started out of the swamp with a lighter heart than he had when he came in.

To make sure of his latitude and longitude, he turned in his tracks when he had gone a little distance and looked for the tree on which he had tied his coat. But it was not to be seen. He re-traced his steps, trying to find his coat. Looking about him cautiously, he saw the garment after a while, but it was in an entirely different direction from what he supposed it would be. It was tied to a sapling, and the sapling was near a big poplar. To satisfy himself, he returned to make a closer examination. Sure enough, there was the coat, but the poplar close by was not a hollow poplar, nor was it as large as the tree in which Ben Gadsby had found the smouldering embers of a fire.

He sat on the trunk of a fallen tree and scratched his head, and discussed the matter in his mind the best he could. Finally he concluded that it would be a very easy matter, after he found his coat again, to find the hollow poplar. So he started home again. But he had not gone far when he turned around to take another view of his coat.

It had disappeared. Ben Gadsby looked carefully around, and then a feeling of terror crept over his whole body—a feeling that nearly paralyzed his limbs. He tried to overcome this feeling, and did so to a certain degree. He plucked up sufficient courage to return and try to find his coat; but the task was indeed bewildering. He thought he had never seen so many large poplars with small slim saplings standing near them, and then he began to wander around almost aimlessly.

IV.

Suddenly he heard a scream that almost paralyzed him—a scream that was followed by the sound of a struggle going on in the thick undergrowth close at hand. He could see the muddy water splash above the bushes, and he could hear fierce growlings and gruntings. Before he could make up his mind what to do, a gigantic mulatto, with torn clothes and staring eyes, rushed out of the swamp and came rushing by, closely pursued by a big white boar with open mouth and fierce cries. The white boar was right at the mulatto's heels, and his yellow tusks gleamed viciously as he ran with open mouth. Pursuer and pursued disappeared in the bushes with a splash and a crash, and then all was as still as before. In fact, the silence seemed profounder for this uncanny and appalling disturbance. It was so unnatural that half a minute after it happened Ben Gadsby was not certain whether it had occurred at all. He was a pretty bold youth, having been used to the woods and fields all his life, but he had now beheld a spectacle so out of the ordinary, and of so startling a character, that he made haste to get out of the swamp as fast as his legs, weakened by fear, would carry him.

More than once, as he made his way out of the swamp, he paused to listen; and it seemed that each time he paused an owl, or some other bird of noiseless wing, made a sudden swoop at his head. Beyond the exclamation he made when this happened the silence was unbroken. This experience was unusual enough to hasten his steps, even if he had had no other motive for haste.

When nearly out of the swamp, he came upon a large poplar, by the side of which a small slim sapling was growing. Tied around this sapling was his coat, which he thought he had left in the middle of the swamp. The sight almost took his breath away.

He examined the coat carefully, and found that the sleeves were tied around the tree just as he had tied them. He felt in the pockets. Everything was just as he had left it. He examined the poplar; it was hollow, and in the hollow was a pile of ashes.

"Well!" exclaimed Ben Gadsby. "I'm the biggest fool that ever walked the earth. If I ain't been asleep and dreamed all this, I'm crazy; and if I've been asleep, I'm a fool."

His experience had been so queer and so confusing that he promised himself he'd never tell it where any of the older people could hear it, for he knew that they would not only treat his tale with scorn and contempt, but would make him the butt of ridicule among the younger folks. "I know exactly what they'd say," he remarked to himself. "They'd declare that a skeer'd hog run across my path, and that I was skeer'der than the hog."

So Ben Gadsby took his coat from the sapling, and went trudging along his way toward the big road. When he reached that point he turned and looked toward the swamp. Much to his surprise, the stream of blue smoke was still flowing upward. He rubbed his eyes and looked again, but there was the smoke. His surprise was still greater when he saw Little Crotchet and the Gray Pony come ambling up the hill in the path he had just come over.

"What did you find?" asked Little Crotchet, as he reined in the Gray Pony.

"Nothing—nothing at all," replied Ben Gadsby, determined not to commit himself.

"Nothing?" cried Little Crotchet. "Well, you ought to have been with me! Why, I saw sights! The birds flew in my face, and when I got in the middle of the swamp a big white hog came rushing out, and if this Gray Pony hadn't been the nimblest of his kind, you'd never have seen me any more."

"Is that so?" asked Ben Gadsby, in a dazed way. "Well, I declare! 'Twas all quiet with me. I just went in and come out again, and that's all there is to it."

"I wish I'd been with you," said Little Crotchet, with a curious laugh. "Good-by!"

With that he wheeled the Gray Pony and rode off home. Ben Gadsby watched Little Crotchet out of sight, and then, with a gesture of despair, surprise, or indignation, flung his coat on the ground, crying, "Well, by jing!"

V.

That night there was so much laughter in the top story of the Abercrombie house that the Colonel himself came to the foot of the stairs and called out to know what the matter was.

"It's nobody but me," replied Little Crotchet. "I was just laughing."

Colonel Abercrombie paused, as if waiting for some further explanation, but hearing none, said, "Good-night, my son, and God bless you!"

"Good-night, father dear," exclaimed the lad, flinging a kiss at the shadow his father's candle flung on the wall. Then he turned again into his own room, where Aaron the Arab (son of Ben Ali) sat leaning against the wall, as silent and as impassive as a block of tawny marble.

Little Crotchet lay back in his bed, and the two were silent for a time. Finally Aaron said:—

"The White Grunter carried his play too far. He nipped a piece from my leg."

"I never saw anything like it," remarked little Crotchet. "I thought the White Pig was angry. You did that to frighten Ben Gadsby."

"Yes, Little Master," responded Aaron, "and I'm thinking the young man will never hunt for the smoke in the swamp any more."

Little Crotchet laughed again, as he remembered how Ben Gadsby looked as Aaron and the White Pig went careening across the dry place in the swamp. There was a silence again, and then Aaron said he must be going.

"And when are you going home to your master?" Little Crotchet asked.

"Never!" replied Aaron the runaway, with emphasis. "Never! He is no master of mine. He is a bad man."

Then he undressed Little Crotchet, tucked the cover about him,—for the nights were growing chill,—whispered good-night, and slipped from the window, letting down the sash gently as he went out. If any one had been watching, he would have seen the tall Arab steal along the roof until he came to the limb of an oak that touched the eaves. Along this he went nimbly, glided down the trunk to the ground, and disappeared in the darkness.

I.

THE LITTLE MASTER.

If you imagine that the book called "The Story of Aaron (so-named), the Son of Ben Ali" tells all the adventures of the Arab while he was a fugitive in the wildwoods, you are very much mistaken. If you will go back to that book you will see that Timoleon the black stallion, Grunter the white pig, Gristle the gray pony, and Rambler the track dog, told only what they were asked to tell. And they were not anxious to tell even that. They would much rather have been left alone. What they did tell they told without any flourishes whatever, for they wanted to get through and be done with it. Story-telling was not in their line, and they knew it very well; so they said what they had to say and that was the end of it so far as they were concerned: setting a worthy example to men and women, and to children, too.

It is natural, therefore, that a man such as Aaron was, full of courage and valuable to the man who had bought him from the speculator, should have many adventures that the animals knew nothing of, or, if they knew, had no occasion to relate. In the book you will find that Buster John and Sweetest Susan asked only about such things as they heard of incidentally. But some of the most interesting things were never mentioned by Aaron at all; consequently the children never asked about them.

Little Crotchet, it will be remembered, who knew more about the matter than anybody except Aaron, was dead, and so there was nobody to give the children any hint or cue as to the questions they were to ask. You will say they had Aaron close at hand. That is true, but Aaron was busy, and besides that he was not fond of talking, especially about himself.

And yet, the most of the adventures Aaron had in the wildwoods were no secret. They were well known to the people in the neighborhood, and for miles around. In fact, they were made the subject of a great deal of talk in Little Crotchet's day, and many men (and women too) who were old enough to be wise shook their heads over some of the events and declared that they had never heard of anything more mysterious. And it so happened that this idea of mystery deepened and grew until it made a very romantic figure of Aaron, and was a great help to him, not only when he was a fugitive in the wildwoods, but afterwards when he "settled down," as the saying is, and turned his attention to looking after affairs on the Abercrombie plantation.

All this happened before Buster John and Sweetest Susan were born, while their mother was a girl in her teens. When Little Crotchet was alive things on the Abercrombie plantation were very different from what they were before or afterward. It is true the lad was a cripple and had to go on crutches, except when he was riding Gristle, the Gray Pony. But he was very active and nimble, and very restless, too, for he was here, there, and everywhere. More than that, he was always in a good humor, always cheerful, and most of the time laughing at his own thoughts or at something he had heard. For it was well understood on that plantation, and, indeed, wherever little Crotchet was familiarly known, that, as he was something of an invalid, and such a little bit of a fellow to boot, nothing unpleasant was to come to his ears. If he found out about trouble anywhere he was to find it out for himself, and without help from anybody else.

But although little Crotchet was small and crippled, he had a very wise head on his shoulders. One of the first things he found out was that everybody was in a conspiracy to prevent unpleasant things from coming to his ears, and the idea that he was to be humbugged in this way made him laugh, it was so funny. He said to himself that if he could have troubles while everybody was trying to help him along and make life pleasant for him, surely other people who had nobody to look out for them must have much larger troubles. And he found it to be true, although he never said much about it.

The truth is that while people thought they were humbugging little Crotchet, he was humbugging everybody except a few who knew what a shrewd little chap he was. These few had found out that little Crotchet knew a great deal more about the troubles that visit the unfortunate in this world than anybody knew about his troubles—and he had many.

It was very peculiar. He would go galloping about the plantation on the Gray Pony, and no matter where he stopped there was always a negro ready to let down the bars or the fence. How could this be? Why, it was the simplest matter in the world. It made no difference where the field hands were working, nor what they were doing, they were always watching for their Little Master, as they called him. They were sure to know when he was coming—sure to see him; and no matter how high the fence was, down it would come whenever the Gray Pony was brought to a standstill.

It was a sight to see the hoe hands or the plow hands when their Little Master went riding among them. It was hats off and "howdy, honey," with all, and that was something the White-Haired Master never saw unless he was riding with Little Crotchet, which sometimes happened. Once the White-Haired Master said to Little Crotchet, "They all love you because you are good, my son." But Little Crotchet was quick to reply:—

"Oh, no, father; it isn't that. It's because I am fond of them!"

Now, wasn't he wise for his age? He had stumbled upon the great secret that makes all the happiness there is in this world. The negroes loved him because he was fond of them. He used to sit on the Gray Pony and watch the hands hoeing and plowing; and although they did their best when he was around, he never failed to find out the tired ones and send them on little errands that would rest them. To one it was "Get me a keen switch." To another, "See if you can find me

any flowers."

One of the worst negroes on the plantation was Big Sal, a mulatto woman. She had a tongue and a temper that nothing could conquer. Once Little Crotchet, sitting on the Gray Pony, saw her hoeing away with a rag tied around her forehead under her head handkerchief. So he called her out of the gang, and she came with no very good grace, and only then because some of the other negroes shamed her into it. No doubt Little Crotchet heard her disputing with them, but he paid no attention to it. When Big Sal came up, he simply said:—

"Help me off the horse. I have a headache sometimes, and I feel it coming on now. I want you to sit here and rub my head for me if you are not too tired."

"What wid?" cried big Sal. "My han's too dirty."

"You get the headache out, and I'll get the dirt off," said Little Crotchet, laughing.

Big Sal laughed too, cleaned her hands the best she could, and rubbed the youngster's head for him, while the Gray Pony nibbled the crabgrass growing near. But presently, when Little Crotchet opened his eyes, he found that Big Sal was crying. She was making no fuss about it, but as she sat with the child's head in her lap the tears were streaming down her face like water.

"What are you crying about?" Little Crotchet asked.

"God A'mighty knows, honey. I'm des a-cryin', an' ef de angels fum heav'm wuz ter come down an' ax me, I couldn't tell um no mo' dan dat."

This was true enough. The lonely heart had been touched without knowing why. But Little Crotchet knew.

"I reckon it's because you had the headache," he said.

"I speck so," answered Big Sal. "It looked like my head'd bust when you hollered at me, but de pain all done gone now."

"I'm glad," replied Little Crotchet. "I hope my head will quit aching presently. Sometimes it aches all night long."

"Well, suh!" exclaimed Big Sal. It was all she could say.

Finally, when she had lifted Little Crotchet to his saddle (which was easy enough to do, he was so small and frail) and returned, Uncle Turin, foreman of the hoe hands, remarked:—

"You'll be feelin' mighty biggity now, I speck."

"Who? Me?" cried Big Sal. "God knows, I feel so little an' mean I could t'ar my ha'r out by de han'ful."

Uncle Turin, simple and kindly old soul, never knew then nor later what Big Sal meant, but ever afterwards, whenever the woman had one of her tantrums, she went straight to her Little Master, and if she sometimes came away from him crying it was not his fault. If she was crying it was because she was comforted, and it all seemed so simple and natural to her that she never failed to express a deep desire to tear her hair out if anybody asked her where she had been or where she was going.

It was not such an easy matter to reach the plow hands. The fields were wide and the furrows were long on that plantation, and some of the mules were nimbler than the others, and some of the hands were quicker. So that it rarely happened that they all came down the furrows abreast. But what difference did that make? Let them come one by one, or two by two, or twenty abreast, it was all the same when the Little Master was in sight. It was hats off and "howdy," with "Gee, Beck!" and "Haw, Rhody!" and "Whar you been, Little Marster, dat we ain't seed you sence day 'fo' yistiddy?" And so until they had all saluted the child on the Gray Pony.

And why did Susy's Sam hang back and want to turn his mule around before he had finished the furrow? It was easy to see. Susy's Sam, though he was the most expert plowman in the gang, had only one good hand, the other being a mere stump, and he disliked to be singled out from the rest on that account. But it was useless for him to hang back. Little Crotchet always called for Susy's Sam. Sometimes Sam would say that his mule was frisky and wouldn't stand. But the word would come, "Well, drive the mule out in the bushes," and then Susy's Sam would have a long resting spell that did him good, and there would be nobody to complain. And so it was with the rest. Whoever was sick or tired was sure to catch the Little Master's eye. How did he know? Well, don't ask too many questions about that. You might ask how the Gray Pony knew the poison vines and grasses. It was a case of just knowing, without knowing where the knowledge came from.

But it was not only the plow hands and the hoe hands that Little Crotchet knew about. At the close of summer there were the cotton pickers and the reapers to be looked after. In fact, this was Little Crotchet's busiest time, for many of the negro children were set to picking cotton, and the lad felt called on to look after these more carefully than he looked after the grown hands. Many a time he had half a dozen holding the Gray Pony at once. This made the older negroes shake their heads, and say that the Little Master was spoiling the children, but you may be sure that they thought none the less of him on that account.

THAT'S RANDALL'S SONG

And then there were the reapers, the men who cut the oats and the wheat, and the binders that followed after. At the head of the reapers was Randall, tall, black, and powerful. It was fun to see the blade of his cradle flashing in the sun, and hear it swing with a swish through the golden grain. He led the reapers always by many yards, but when he was making the pace too hot for them he had a way of stopping to sharpen his scythe and starting up a song which spread from mouth to mouth until it could be heard for miles. Aaron, hiding in the wildwoods, could hear it, and at such times he would turn to one of his companions—the White Pig, or Rambler, or that gay joker, the Fox Squirrel—and say: "That's Randall's song. He sees the Little Master coming."

The White Pig would grunt, and Rambler would say he'd rather hear a horn; but the Red Squirrel would chatter like mad and declare that he lost one of his ears by sitting on a limb of the live oak and singing when he saw a man coming.

But the reapers knew nothing about the experience of the Fox Squirrel, and so they went on singing whenever Randall gave the word. And Little Crotchet was glad to hear them, for he used to sit on the Gray Pony and listen, sometimes feeling happy, and at other times feeling lonely indeed. It may have been the quaint melody that gave him a lonely feeling, or it may have been his sympathy for those who suffer the pains of disease or the pangs of trouble. The negroes used to watch him as they sang and worked, and say in the pauses of their song:—

"Little marster mighty funny!"

That was the word,—"funny,"—and yet it had a deeper meaning for the negroes than the white people ever gave it. Funny!—when the lad leaned his pale cheek on the frail hand, and allowed his thoughts (were they thoughts or fleeting aspirations or momentary longings?) to follow the swift, sweet echoes of the song. For the echoes had a thousand nimble feet, and with these they fled away, away,—away beyond the river and its bordering hills; for the echoes had twangling wings, like those of a turtle-dove, and on these they lifted themselves heavenward, and floated above the world, and above the toil and trouble and sorrow and pain that dwell therein.

Funny!—when the voice of some singer, sweeter and more powerful than the rest, rose suddenly from the pauses of the song, and gave words, as it seemed, to all the suffering that the Little Master had ever known. Aye! so funny that at such times Little Crotchet would suddenly wave his hand to the singing reapers, and turn the Gray Pony's head toward the river. Was he following the rolling echoes? He could never hope to overtake them.

Once when this happened Uncle Fountain stopped singing to say:—

"I wish I wuz a runaway nigger!"

"No, you don't!" exclaimed Randall.

"Yes, I does," Uncle Fountain insisted.

"How come?"

"Kaze den I'd have little Marster runnin' atter me ev'y chance he got."

"Go 'way, nigger man! You'd have Jim Simmons's nigger dogs atter you, an' den what'd you do?"

"Dat ar Aaron had um atter 'im, an' what'd he do?"

"De Lord, He knows,—I don't! But don't you git de consate in yo' min' dat you kin do what Aaron done done, kaze you'll fool yo'se'f, sho!"

"What Aaron done done?" Fountain was persistent.

"He done fool dem ar nigger dogs; dat what he done done."

"Den how come I can't fool dem ar dogs?"

"How come? Well, you des try um one time, mo' speshully dat ar col'-nose dog, which he name Soun'."

"Well, I ain't bleege ter try it when de white folks treat me right," remarked Uncle Fountain, after thinking the matter over.

"Dat what make I say what I does," asserted Randall. "When you know 'zactly what you got, an' when you got mighty nigh what you want, dat's de time ter lay low an' say nothin'. Hit's some trouble ter git de corn off'n de cob, but spozen dey want no corn on de cob, what den?"

"Honey, ain't it de trufe?" exclaimed Uncle Fountain.

Thus the negroes talked. They knew a great deal more about Aaron than the white people did, but even the negroes didn't know as much as the Little Master, and for a very good reason. They had no time to find out things, except at night, and at night—well, you may believe it or not, just as you please, but at night the door of the Swamp was closed and locked—locked hard and fast. The owls, the night hawks, the whippoorwills, and the chuck-will's widows could fly over. Yes, and the Willis Whistlers could creep through or crawl under when they returned home from their wild serenades. But everything else—even that red joker, the Fox Squirrel—must have a key. Aaron had one, and the White Grunter, and Rambler, and all the four-footed creatures that walk on horn sandals or in velvet slippers each had a key. The Little Master might have had one for the asking, but always when night came he was glad to lie on his sofa and read, or, better still, go to bed and sleep, so that he never had the need of a key to open the door of the Swamp after it was closed and locked at night.

II.

THE SECRETS OF THE SWAMP.

However hard and fast the door of the Swamp may be locked at night, however tightly it may be shut, it opens quickly enough to whomsoever carries the key. There is no creaking of its vast and heavy hinges; there is not the faintest flutter of a leaf, nor the softest whisper of a blade of grass. That is the bargain the bearer of the key must make:—

That which sleeps, disturb not its slumber.
That which moves, let it swiftly pass.

Else the Swamp will never reveal itself. The sound of one alien footfall is enough. It is the signal for each secret to hide itself, and for all the mysteries to vanish into mystery. The Swamp calls them all in, covers them as with a mantle, and puts on its every-day disguise,—the disguise that the eyes of few mortals have ever penetrated. But those who stand by the bargain that all key-bearers must make—whether they go on two legs or on four, whether they fly or crawl or creep or swim—find the Swamp more friendly. There is no disguise anywhere. The secrets come swarming forth from all possible or impossible places; and the mysteries, led by their torch-bearer Jack-o'-the-Lantern, glide through the tall canes and move about among the tall trees.

The unfathomable blackness of night never sets foot here. It is an alien and is shut out. And this is one of the mysteries. If, when the door of the Swamp is opened to a key-bearer the black night seems to have crept in, wait a moment,—have patience. It is a delusion. Underneath this leafy covering, in the midst of this dense growth of vines and saw-grass and reeds and canes, there is always a wonderful hint of dawn—a shadowy, shimmering hint, elusive and indescribable, but yet sufficient to give dim shape to that which is near at hand.

Not far away the frightened squeak of some small bird breaks sharply on the ear of the Swamp. This is no alien note, and Jack-o'-the-Lantern dances up and down, and all the mysteries whisper in concert:—

"We wish you well, Mr. Fox. Don't choke yourself with the feathers. Good-night, Mr. Fox, good-night!"

Two minute globules of incandescent light come into sight and disappear, and the mysteries whisper:—

"Too late, Mr. Mink, too late! Better luck next time. Good-night!"

A rippling sound is heard in the lagoon as the Leander of the Swamp slips into the water. Jack-o'-the-Lantern flits to the level shore of the pool, and the mysteries come sweeping after, sighing:—

"Farewell, Mr. Muskrat! Good luck and good-night!"

Surely there is an alien sound on the knoll yonder,—snapping, growling, and fighting. Have stray dogs crept under the door? Oh, no! The Swamp smiles, and all the mysteries go trooping thither to see the fun. It is a wonderful frolic! Mr. Red Fox has met Mr. Gray Fox face to face. Something tells Mr. Red Fox "Here's your father's enemy." Something whispers to Mr. Gray, "Here's your mother's murderer." And so they fall to, screaming and gnawing and panting and snarling. Mr. Gray Fox is the strongest, but his heart is the weakest. Without warning he turns tail and flies, with Mr. Red Fox after him, and with all the mysteries keeping them company. They run until they are past the boundary line,—the place where the trumpet flower tried to marry the black-jack tree,—and then, of course, the Swamp has no further concern with them. And the mysteries and their torch-bearers come trooping home.

MR. RED FOX MEETS MR. GRAY FOX

It is fun when Mr. Red Fox and Mr. Gray Fox meet on the knoll, but the Swamp will never have such a frolic as it had one night when a strange bird came flying in over the door. It is known that the birds that sleep while the Swamp is awake have been taught to hide their heads under their wings. It is not intended that they should see what is going on. Even the Buzzard, that sleeps in the loblolly pine, and the wild turkey, that sleeps in the live oak, conform to this custom. They are only on the edge of the Swamp, but they feel that it would be rude not to put their heads under their wings while the Swamp is awake. But this strange bird—of a family of night birds not hitherto known to that region—was amazed when he beheld the spectacle.

"Oho!" he cried; "what queer country is this, where all the birds are headless? If I'm to live here in peace, I must do as the brethren do."

So he went off in search of advice. As he went along he saw the Bull-Frog near the lagoon.

"Queerer still," exclaimed the stranger. "Here is a bird that has no head, and he can sing."

This satisfied him, and he went farther until he saw Mr. Wildcat trying to catch little Mr. Flying-Squirrel.

"Good-evening, sir," said the stranger. "I see that the birds in this country have no heads."

Mr. Wildcat smiled and bowed and licked his mouth.

"I presume, sir, that I ought to get rid of my head if I am to stay here, and I have nowhere else to go. How am I to do it?"

"Easy enough," responded Mr. Wildcat, smiling and bowing and licking his mouth. "Birds that are so unfortunate as to have heads frequently come to me for relief. May I examine your neck to see what can be done?"

The strange bird fully intended to say, "Why, certainly, sir!" He had the words all made up, but his head was off before he could speak. Being a large bird, he fluttered and shook his wings and jumped about a good deal. As the noise was not alien, the Swamp and all its mysteries came forth to investigate, and oh, what a frolic there was when Mr. Wildcat related the facts! The torch-bearers danced up and down with glee, and the mysteries waltzed to the quick piping of the Willis-Whistlers.

Although the Swamp was not a day older when Aaron, the Son of Ben Ali, became a key-bearer, the frolic over the headless bird was far back of Aaron's time. Older! The Swamp was even younger, for it was not a Swamp until old age had overtaken it—until centuries had made it fresh and green and strong. The Indians had camped round about, had tried to run its mysteries down, and had failed. Then came a band of wandering Spaniards, with ragged clothes, and tarnished helmets, and rusty shields, and neighing horses—the first the Swamp had ever seen. The Spaniards floundered in at one side—where the trumpet vine tried to marry the black-jack tree—and floundered out on the other side more bedraggled than ever. This was a great victory for the Swamp, and about that time it came to know and understand itself. For centuries it had been "organizing," and when it pulled De Soto's company of Spaniards in at one side and flung them out at the other, considerably the worse for wear, it felt that the "organization" was complete. And so it was and had been for years and years, and so it remained thereafter—a quiet place when the sun was above the trees, but wonderfully alert and alive when night had fallen.

The Swamp that Aaron knew was the same that the Indians and Spaniards had known. The loblolly pine had grown, and the big poplars on the knoll had expanded a trifle with the passing centuries, but otherwise the Swamp was the same. And yet how different! The Indians had not found it friendly, and the Spaniards regarded it as an enemy; but to Aaron it gave shelter, and sometimes food, and its mysteries were his companions. Jack-o'-the-Lantern showed him the hidden paths when the mists of night fell darker than usual. He became as much a part of the Swamp as the mysteries were, entering into its life, and becoming native to all its moods and conditions. And his presence there seemed to give the Swamp new responsibilities. Its thousand eyes were always watching for his enemies, and its thousand tongues were always ready to whisper the news of the coming of an alien. The turkey buzzard, soaring thousands of feet above the top of the great pine, the blue falcon, suspended in the air a mile away, the crow, flapping lazily across the fields, stood sentinel during the day, and the Swamp understood the messages they sent. At night the Willis-Whistlers were on guard, and their lines extended for miles in all directions, and the Swamp itself was awake, and needed no warning message. Sometimes at night the sound of Randall's trumpet fell on the ear of the Swamp, or the voice of Uncle Fountain was heard lifted up in song, as he went over the hills to his fish-baskets in the river; and these were restful and pleasing sounds. Sometimes the trailing cry of hounds was heard. If in the day, Rambler, the track dog, would listen until he knew whether the cry came from Jim Simmons's "nigger dogs," from the Gossett hounds, or from some other pack. If at night, the Swamp cared little about it, for it was used to these things after the sun went down.

Mr. Coon insisted on gadding about, and it served him right, the Swamp insisted, when the hounds picked up his drag—as the huntsmen say—and brought him home with a whirl. He was safe when he got there, for let the hounds bay at the door of his house as long as they might, no hunter with torch and axe would venture into the Swamp. They had tried it—oh, many times.

But the door was locked, and the key
Was safely kid in a hollow tree.

If it was merely Cousin Coon who lived up the river, well and good. It would teach the incurable

vagrant a lesson, and the Swamp enjoyed the fun. The Willis-Whistlers stopped to listen, the mysteries hid behind the trees, and Jack-o'-the-Lantern extinguished his torch as the hounds came nearer with their quavering cries. Was it Mr. Coon or Cousin Coon? Why, Cousin Coon, of course. How did the Swamp know? It was the simplest thing in the world. Wasn't there a splash and a splutter as he ran into the quagmire? Wasn't there a snap and a snarl when the partridge-pea vine caught his foot? Did he know the paths? Didn't he double and turn and go back the way he came, to be caught and killed on dry land? Would Mr. Coon of the Swamp ever be caught on dry land? Don't you believe it! If cut off from home, he would run to the nearest pond and plunge in. Once there, was there a hound that would venture to take a bath with him? The Swamp laughed at the thought of such a thing. Aaron smiled, the White Pig grunted, and Rambler grinned. Cousin Coon is no more, but Mr. Coon is safe at home and the Swamp knows it.

Good luck to all who know the way,
By crooked path and clinging vine!
For them Night's messengers shall stay,
For them the laggard moon shall shine.

But it was not always that aliens and strangers were unwelcome. Occasionally in the still hours between midnight and dawn the Swamp would open its doors to Gossett's Riley. He had no key and he had never come to know and feel that the Swamp was something more than a mixture of mud and water, trees, canes, vines, and all manner of flying, creeping, and crawling things. To him the Swamp was merely a place and not a Thing, but this was ignorance, and the Swamp forgave it for various reasons, forgave it and pitied him as he deserved to be pitied. And yet he had qualities out of the common, and for these the Swamp admired him. He was little more than a dwarf, being "bow-legged and chuckle-headed," as Susy's Sam used to say, and was called Chunky Riley, but he was very much of a man for all that. At a log-rolling there was not a negro for miles around who could pull him down with the handstick. Aaron could do it, but Aaron was not a negro, but an Arab, and that is different. Chunky Riley was even stronger in limb and body than Aaron, but Aaron used his head, as well as body and limb—and that also is different. Riley was not swift of foot, but he could run far, as Gossett's hounds well knew. More than that, he could go on all-fours almost as fast as he could run on two legs, and that was something difficult to do.

The Swamp found Chunky Riley out in a very curious way. The first time he came to bring a message to Aaron he waited for no introduction whatever. The Willis-Whistlers warned him, but he paid no attention to their warning; the mysteries whispered to him, but his ears were closed. He searched for no path, and was blind to all the signals. He blundered into the Swamp and floundered toward the knoll as the Spaniards did. He floundered out of the quagmire near where the White Pig lay. He had the scent and all the signs of an alien, and the White Grunter rushed at him with open mouth. The Swamp was now angry from centre to circumference, and poor Chunky Riley's ending would have been swift and sudden but for the fact that he bore some undeveloped kinship to the elements that surrounded him.

A-STRADDLE OF THE GRUNTER'S BACK

As the White Pig rushed forward with open mouth, Chunky Riley caught a vague glimpse of him in the darkness, gave one wild yell, leaped into the air, and came down a-straddle of the Grunter's back. This was more than the White Pig had bargained for. He answered Riley's yell with a loud squeal, and went tearing through the swamp to the place where Aaron dwelt. The big owl hooted, Rambler howled, and Jack-o'-the-Lantern threw down his torch and fled. The Swamp that had been angry was amazed and frightened. What demon was this that had seized the White Grunter and was carrying him off? What could the rest hope for if so fierce a creature as the White Pig could be disposed of in this fashion? Even Aaron was alarmed at the uproar, for Chunky Riley continued to yell, and the White Pig kept up its squealing.

It was well that the Grunter, when he came to Aaron's place, ran close enough to a tree to rub Chunky Riley off his back, otherwise there is no telling what would have happened. It was well, too, that Chunky Riley called loudly for Aaron when he fell, otherwise he would have been made mincemeat of; for as soon as the White Pig was relieved of his strange burden, his anger rose fiercer than ever, and he came charging at Chunky Riley, who was lying prone on the ground, too frightened to do anything more than try to run to a tree on all-fours. Aaron spoke sharply to the White Pig.

"Shall I use a club on you, White Grunter? Shall I make bacon of you? You heard him call my name."

The White Pig paused. His small eyes glittered in the dark, and Chunky Riley heard his tusks grate ominously. He knew the creature was foaming with rage.

"Ooft! Your name, Son of Ben Ali?" said the White Pig in language that Chunky Riley thought was merely a series of angry grunts and snorts. "Ooft! I heard him call for Aaron, and how long has it been since I heard you say to the Red Chatterer in the hickory-tree that there were a thousand Aarons, but only one Son of Ben Ali? Ooft-Gooft! Am I a horse to be ridden? Humph! No man could ride me—it is what you call a Thing. Umph! let it ride you and then talk about clubs. Ooft!"

"Is dat Aaron?" Chunky Riley ventured to inquire. "Ef 't is, I wish you'd be good enough ter run dat ar creetur 'way fum here, kaze I ain't got no knack fer bein' chaw'd up an' spit out, an' trompled on, an' teetotally ruint right 'fo' my own face."

"What's your name?" inquired Aaron.

"You ought ter know me, but I dunner whedder you does er not. I'm name Riley—dey calls me Chunky Riley fer short."

Aaron was silent for a moment, as if trying to remember the name. Presently he laughed and said: "Why, yes; I know you pretty well. Come, we'll kindle a fire."

"No suh—not me! Not less'n you'll run dat ar wil' hog off. He mo' servigrous dan a pant'er. Ef I hadn't er straddled 'im des now he'd 'a' e't me bodaciously up an' dey wouldn't 'a' been nothin' lef' but de buttons on my cloze, an' nobody in de roun' worl' would 'a' know'd dey wuz buttons."

Aaron laughed while speaking to the White Pig: "Get to bed, Grunter. It is the Lifter—the man that is as strong in the back as a horse."

"Gooft-ooft! Let him ride you out as he rode me in—ooft! He's no man! Gooft! No bed for me. When a horse is ridden, he must eat, as I've heard you say, Son of Ben Ali. Gooft-ooft!"

The White Pig, still grinding his tusks together, turned and trotted off into the darkness, and presently Aaron and Chunky Riley heard him crashing through the canes and reeds. Then Aaron kindled his fire.

"Why did you come?" inquired the Son of Ben Ali when the two had made themselves comfortable.

"Des ter fetch word dat Marster wuz layin' off ter git atter you wid Simmons's nigger-dogs 'fo' long."

"All the way through the dark for that? When did you come to like me so well?"

"Oh, 't ain't 'zackly dat," replied Chunky Riley frankly. "I hear um talkin' 'bout it when marster an' dat ar Mr. Simmons wuz walkin' out in de hoss lot. I wuz in de corn crib, an' dey didn't know it, an' I des sot dar an' lis'n at um. An' den dis mornin' I seed dat ar little Marse Abercrombie, an' he say, 'Go tell Aaron quick ez you kin.'"

"The child with the crutches?" queried Aaron.

"De ve'y same," replied Chunky Riley. He paused awhile and then added: "I'd walk many a long mile fer dat white chil', day er night, rain er shine."

He gazed in the flickering fire a long time, waiting for Aaron to make some comment. Hearing none, he finally turned his eyes on his companion. Aaron was looking skyward, where one small star could be seen twinkling through the ascending smoke from the fire, and his lips were moving, though they framed no words that Chunky Riley could hear. Something in the attitude of the Son of Ben Ali disturbed the negro.

"Well, I done what I come ter do," he said, making a pretense of stretching himself and yawning, "an' I speck I'd better be gwine." The Son of Ben Ali still kept his eye fixed on the twinkling star. "What pesters me," Chunky Riley went on, "is de idee dat dat ar wil' hog went 'zackly de way I got ter go. I don't want ter hatter ride 'im no mo' less'n I got a saddle an' bridle."

"Come!" exclaimed Aaron suddenly, "I'll go with you. I want to see the Little Master."

"De dogs'll fin' yo' track sho, ef dey start out to-morrer," suggested Chunky Riley.

The only response the Son of Ben Ali made to this suggestion was to say: "Take the end of my cane in your hand and follow it. We'll take a short cut."

Chunky Riley had queer thoughts as he followed his tall conductor, being led as if he were a blind man; but he said nothing. Presently (it seemed but a few minutes to Chunky Riley) they stood on the top of a hill.

"Look yonder!" said Aaron. Away to the left a red light glimmered faintly.

"What dat?" asked the superstitious negro.

"The light in the Little Master's window."

"How came it so red, den?" inquired Chunky Riley.

"Red curtain," replied Aaron curtly.

"Well, de Lord he'p us! Is we dat close?" cried Chunky Riley.

"Your way is there," said the Son of Ben Ali; "this is mine."

The negro stood watching Aaron until his tall form was lost in the darkness.

III.

WHAT CHUNKY RILEY SAW AND HEARD

Left alone, Chunky Riley stood still and tried to trace in his mind the route he and Aaron had followed in coming from the Swamp. But he could make no mental map—and he knew every "nigh-cut" and by-path for miles around—that would fit in with the time it had taken them to reach the spot where he now stood. He looked back toward the Swamp, but the night covered it, and he could see nothing. Then he looked around him, to see if he knew his present whereabouts. Oh, yes, that was easy; every foot of ground was familiar.

The hill on which he had stood had been given over to scrub pines. The hill itself sloped away to the Turner old fields. But still he was puzzled, and still he scratched his head, for he knew that the Swamp was a good four miles away—nearly five—and it seemed to him that he and Aaron had been only a few minutes in making the journey. So he scratched his head and wondered to himself whether Aaron was really a "conjur' man."

It was perhaps very lucky for Chunky Riley that he stopped when he did. If he had kept on he would have run into the arms of three men who were going along the plantation path that led from Gossett's negro quarters to the Abercrombie Place. The delay that Chunky Riley made prevented him from meeting them, but it did not prevent him from hearing the murmur of their voices as he struck into the path. They were too far off for Chunky Riley to know whether they were white or black, but just as he turned into the path to go to Gossett's the scent of a cigar floated to his nostrils. He paused and scratched his head again. He knew by the scent of the cigar that the voices he heard belonged to white men: but who were they? If they were the "patterollers" they'd catch Aaron beyond all question; it would be impossible for him to escape.

So thought Chunky Riley, and so thinking, he turned and followed the path towards the Abercrombie Place. He moved rapidly but cautiously. The scent of the cigar grew stronger, the sound of men's voices fell more distinctly on his ear. Chunky Riley left the path and skirted through the low pines until he came to the fence that inclosed the spring lot. He knew that if he was heard, the men would think he was a calf, or, mayhap, a mule; for the hill on which Aaron had left him was now a part of a great pasture, in which the calves and dry cattle and (between seasons) the mules were allowed to roam at will.

Coming to the fence, Chunky Riley would have crossed it, but the voices were louder now, and he caught a glimpse of the red sparks of lighted cigars. Creeping closer and closer, but ever ready to drop on the ground and run away on all-fours, Chunky Riley was soon able to hear what the men were saying. He knew the voices of his master and young master, Mr. Gossett—Old Grizzle, as he was called—and George, and he rightly judged that the strange voice mingling with theirs belonged to Mr. Jim Simmons, who, with a trained pack of hounds,—"nigger dogs" they were called,—held himself at the service of owners of runaway negroes.

Mr. Simmons's average fee was $15—that is to say when he was "called in time." But in special cases his charge was $30. When Chunky Riley arrived within earshot of the group, Mr. Gossett was just concluding a protest that he had made against the charge of $30, which he had reluctantly agreed to pay for the capture of Aaron.

"You stayed at my house to-day, you'll stay there to-night, and maybe you'll come back to dinner to-morrow. There's the feeding of you and your dogs. You don't take any account of that at all."

Mr. Gossett's voice was sharp and emphatic. His stinginess was notorious in that region, and gave rise to the saying that Gossett loved a dollar better than he did his wife. But he was no more ashamed of his stinginess than he was of the shabbiness of his hat.

"But, Colonel," remonstrated Mr. Jim Simmons, "didn't you send for me? Didn't you say, 'Glad to see you, Simmons; walk right in and make yourself at home'? You did, fer a fact." He spoke with a drawl that irritated the snappy and emphatic Mr. Gossett.

"Why, certainly, Simmons; certainly I did. I mentioned the matter to show you that your charges are out of all reason in this case. All you have to do is to come here with your dogs in the morning, skirt around the place, pick up his trail, and there you are."

"But, Colonel!" insisted Mr. Jim Simmons with his careless, irritating drawl, "ain't it a plum' fact that this nigger's been in the woods a month or sech a matter? Ain't it a plum' fact that you've tracked him and trailed him with your own dogs?—and good dogs they are, and I'll tell anybody so. Now what do you pay me fer? Fer catching the nigger? No, sirree! The nigger's as good as caught now—when it comes to that. You pay me fer knowing how to catch him—that's what you pay me fer. You send fer the doctor. He comes and fumbles around a little, and you have to pay the bill whether he kills or cures. You don't pay him fer killing or curing; you pay him fer knowing how to fumble around. It's some different with me. If I don't catch your nigger, you button up your pocket. If I do catch him you pay me $30 down, not fer catching him, but fer knowing how to fumble around and catch him."

The logic of this argument, which was altogether lost on Chunky Riley, silenced Mr. Gossett, but did not convince him. There was a long pause, as if all three of the men were wrestling with peculiar thoughts. Finally Mr. Gossett spoke:—

"It ain't so much the nigger I'm after, but I want to show Abercrombie that I can't be outdone. He's laughing in his sleeve because I can't keep the nigger at home, and I'll be blamed"—here his

voice sank to a confidential tone—"I'll be blamed if I don't believe that, between him and that son of his, they are harboring the nigger. Yes, sir, harboring is the word."

Mr. Jim Simmons threw down his lighted cigar with such energy as to cause the sparks to fly in all directions. A cigar was an unfamiliar luxury to Mr. Simmons, and he had had enough of it.

"Addison Abercrombie harboring a nigger!" exclaimed Mr. Simmons. "Why, Colonel, if every man, woman, and child in the United States was to tell me that I wouldn't believe it. Addison Abercrombie! Why, Colonel, though you're his next-door neighbor, as you may say, you don't know him half as well as I do. You ought to get acquainted with that man."

"Humph! I know him well enough, I reckon," responded Mr. Gossett. "I went to school with him. Folks get to know one another at school. He was always stuck up, trying to hold his head higher than anybody else because his daddy had money and a big plantation. I made my prop'ty myself; I earned every dollar; and I know how it came."

"But, Colonel!" Mr. Jim Simmons insisted, "Addison Abercrombie would hold his head high if he never seen a dollar, and he'd have the right to do it. Him harbor niggers? Shucks, Colonel! You might as well tell me that the moon ain't nothing but a tater pudding."

"What do you see in the man?" Mr. Gossett asked with some irritation in the tones of his voice.

There was a pause, as though Mr. Simmons was engaged in getting his thoughts together. Finally he said:—

"Well, Colonel, I don't reckon I can make it plain to you, because when I come to talk about it I can't grab the identical idee that would fit what I've got in my mind. But I'll tell you what's the honest truth, in my opinion—and I'm not by myself, by a long shot—Addison Abercrombie is as fine a man as ever trod shoe leather. That's what."

"Humph!" grunted Mr. Gossett.

"Yes, sirree!" persisted Mr. Simmons, warming up a little. "It makes no difference where you see him, nor when you see him, nor how you see him, you can up and say: 'The Lord has made many men of many minds, and many men of many kinds, but not sence Adam has he made a better man than Addison Abercrombie.' That's the way I look at it, Colonel. I may be wrong, but if I am I'll never find it out in this world."

Plainly, Mr. Gossett was not prepared to hear such a tribute as this paid to Addison Abercrombie, and he winced under it. He hemmed and hawed, as the saying is, and changed his position on the fence. He was thoroughly disgusted. Now there was no disagreement between Mr. Gossett and Mr. Abercrombie,—no quarrel, that is to say,—but Gossett knew that Abercrombie regarded him with a feeling akin to contempt. He treasured in his mind a remark that Abercrombie had made about him the day he bought Aaron from the negro speculator. He never forgot nor forgave it, for it was an insinuation that Mr. Gossett, in spite of his money and his thrifty ways, was not much of a gentleman.

On this particular subject Mr. Gossett was somewhat sensitive, as men are who have doubts in their own minds as to their standing. Mr. Gossett had an idea that money and "prop'ty," as he called it, made a gentleman; but it was a very vague idea, and queer doubts sometimes pestered him. It was these doubts that made him "touchy" on this subject.

"What has this great man ever done for you, Simmons?" Mr. Gossett asked, with a contemptuous snort.

"Not anything, Colonel, on the top of the green globe. I went to him once to borrow some money, and he wanted to lend it to me without taking my note and without charging me any interest. I says to him, says I, 'You'll have to excuse me.'"

"That was right; you did perfectly right, Simmons. The man was trying to insult you."

"But, Colonel, he didn't go about it that way. Don't you reckon you could tell when anybody was trying to insult you? That was the time I come to you."

"I charged you interest, didn't I, Simmons?"

"You did, Colonel, fer a fact."

"I'm this kind of a man, Simmons," remarked Mr. Gossett, with a touch of sincere pride and gratification in his voice. "When I do business with a man I do business. When I do him a favor it must be outside of business. It's mixing the two things up that keeps so many people poor."

"What two things, Colonel?" gravely inquired Simmons.

"Why the doing of business and—er—the doing of favors."

"Oh, I see," said Mr. Simmons, as if a great light had been turned on the matter. Then he laughed and continued: "Yes, Colonel, I borrowed the money from you and just about that time the fever taken me down, and if it hadn't 'a' been fer Addison Abercrombie the note I give you would have swallowed my house and land."

"Is that so?" inquired Mr. Gossett.

"Ask my wife," replied Mr. Simmons. "One day while I was out of my head with the fever, Addison Abercrombie, he rid by and saw my wife setting on the front steps, jest a-boohooing,—you know how wimmen will do, Colonel; if they ain't a-jawing they're a-cryin'. So Addison Abercrombie, he ups and asks her what's the matter, and Jennie, she tells him. He got right off his hoss and come in, and set by my bed the better part of the morning. And all that time there I was a-running on

about notes and a-firing off my troubles in the air. So the upshot of the business was that Addison Abercrombie left the money there to pay the note and left word for me to pay him back when I got good and ready; and Jennie hadn't hardly dried her eyes before here come a nigger on horseback with a basket on his arm, and in the basket was four bottles of wine. Wine! Why, Colonel, it was worse'n wine. Jennie says that if arry one of the bottles had 'a' had a load of buckshot in it, the roof would 'a' been blow'd off when the stopper flew out. And, Colonel! if ever you feel like taking a right smart of exercise, jest pass my house some day and stick your head over the palings and tell Jennie that Addison Abercrombie's got a streak of meanness in him."

"Have you ever paid Abercrombie?" Mr. Gossett inquired. His voice was harsh and businesslike.

"I was laying off to catch this nigger of yours and pay him some on account," replied Mr. Simmons.

"Why, it has been three years since you paid me," suggested Mr. Gossett.

"Two years or sech a matter," remarked Mr. Simmons complacently.

"Then that's the reason you think Abercrombie ain't harboring my nigger?" inquired Mr. Gossett scornfully.

"But, Colonel," drawled Mr. Simmons, "what under the sun ever got the idee in your head that Addison Abercrombie *is* harboring your nigger?"

"It's as simple as a-b ab," Mr. Gossett replied with energy. "He tried to buy the nigger off the block and couldn't, and now he thinks I'll sell if the nigger'll stay in the woods long enough. That's the reason he's harboring the nigger. And more than that: don't I know from my own niggers that the yaller rapscallion comes here every chance he gets? He comes, but he don't go in the nigger quarters. Now, where does he go?"

"Yes, where?" said Mr. Gossett's son George, who up to that moment had taken no part in the conversation. "Three times this month I've dealt out an extra rasher of bacon to two of our hands, and they tell the same tale."

"It looks quare," Mr. Simmons admitted, "but as sure as you're born Addison Abercrombie ain't the man to harbor a runaway nigger. If he's ever had a nigger in the woods, it's more'n I know, and when that's the case you may set it down fer a fact that he don't believe in runaway niggers." This was a lame argument, but it was the best that Mr. Simmons could muster at the moment.

"No," remarked Mr. Gossett sarcastically, "his niggers don't take to the woods because they do as they blamed please at home. It sets my teeth on edge to see the way things are run on this plantation. Why, I could take the stuff that's flung away here and get rich on it in five years. It's a scandal."

"I believe you!" assented his son George dutifully.

Chunky Riley heard this conversation by snatches, but he caught the drift of it. What he remembered of it was that some of his fellow servants were ready to tell all they knew for an extra "rasher" of meat, and that the hunt for Aaron would begin the next morning,—and it was now getting along toward dawn. He wanted to warn Aaron again. He wanted especially to tell Aaron that three men were sitting on the fence waiting for him. But this was impossible. The hour was approaching when Chunky Riley must be in his cabin on the Gossett plantation ready to go to work with the rest of the hands. He had slept soundly the first half of the night, and he would be as fresh in the field when the sun rose as those who had slept the night through. As he turned away from the fence a dog in the path leading from the spring to the stile suddenly began to bay. The men tried to drive him away, and one of them threw a stick at him, but the dog refused to be intimidated. He bayed them more fiercely, but finally retreated toward the spring, stopping occasionally to bark at the men on the fence.

"If I'm not mistaken," remarked Mr. Gossett, "that's my dog Rambler. I know his voice, and he's been missing ever since that nigger went to the woods. I wonder if he's taken up over here? George, I wish you'd make it convenient to come over here as soon as you can, and find out whether Rambler is here. Now, there's a dog, Simmons, that's away ahead of anything you've got in the shape of a nigger dog,—nose as cold as ice, and as much sense as the common run of folks."

"He ain't doing you much good," responded Mr. Simmons.

"That's a fact," said Mr. Gossett. "Till I heard that dog barking I thought Rambler had been killed by that nigger."

Chunky Riley struck into the plantation path leading to Gossett's, at the point where the three men had tied their horses. They had ridden as far as they thought prudent, considering the errand they were on, and then they dismounted and made their horses fast to the overhanging limbs of a clump of oaks, which, for some reason or other, had been left standing in the field. One of the horses whinnied when Chunky Riley came near, and the negro paused. Aaron would have known that the horse said, "Please take me home, and be quick about it; I'm hungry;" but Chunky Riley could only guess. And as he guessed a thought struck him—a thought that made him scratch his head and chuckle. He turned in his tracks, went back along the path a little way, and listened. Then he returned, and the horse whinnied again. The creature was growing impatient.

Once more Chunky Riley indulged in a hearty laugh, slapping himself softly on the leg. Then he went to the horses one by one, pulled down the swinging limbs to which their bridle reins were fastened, and untied them. This done, he proceeded to make himself "mighty skace," as he

expressed it. He started toward home at a rapid trot, without pausing to listen. But even without listening, he could hear the horses coming after him, Mr. Simmons's horse with the others.

The faster he trotted the faster the horses trotted; and when Chunky Riley began to run the horses broke into a gallop, and came clattering along the path after him, their stirrups flying wildly about and making a clamor that Chunky Riley had not bargained for. The faster he ran the faster the horses galloped, until at last it seemed to him that the creatures were trying to run him down. This idea took possession of his mind, and at once his fears magnified the situation. He imagined the horses were right at his heels. He could feel the hot breath of one of them on the back of his neck.

Fortunately for Chunky Riley there was a fence at the point where the path developed into a lane. Over this he climbed and fell exhausted, fully expecting the horses to climb over or break through and trample him under their feet. But his expectations were not realized; the horses galloped along the lane, and presently he could hear them clattering along the big road toward Gossett's.

Chunky Riley was exhausted as well as terror-stricken. The perspiration rolled from his face, and he could hear his heart beat. He lay in the soft grass in the fence corner until he had recovered somewhat from his exertions and his fright. Finally he rose, looked back along the way he had come, then toward the big road, and shook his head.

THE HORSES WERE RIGHT AT HIS HEELS

"Is anybody ever see de beat er dat?" he exclaimed.

Whereupon he went through the woods instead of going by the road, and was soon in his cabin frying his ration of bacon.

IV.

BETWEEN MIDNIGHT AND DAWN.

When Aaron parted from Chunky Riley on the hill after they had come from the Swamp, he went along the path to the spring, stooped on his hands and knees and took a long draught of the cool water. Then he went to the rear of the negro quarters, crossed the orchard fence, and passed thence to the flower garden in front of the great house. At one corner of the house a large oak reared its head above the second story. Some of its limbs when swayed by the wind swept the dormer window that jutted out from Little Crotchet's room. Behind the red curtain of this dormer window a light shone, although it was now past midnight. It shone there at night whenever Little Crotchet was restless and sleepless and wanted to see Aaron. And this was often, for the youngster, with all his activity, rarely knew what it was to be free from pain. But for his journeys hither and yonder on the Gray Pony he would have been very unhappy indeed. All day long he could make some excuse for putting his aches aside; he could even forget them. But at night when everything was quiet, Pain would rap at the door and insist on coming in and getting in bed with him.

Little Crotchet had many quaint thoughts and queer imaginings, and one of these was that Pain was a sure-enough something or other that could come in at the door and go out when it chose—a little goblin dressed in red flannel, with a green hat running to a sharp peak at the top, and a yellow tassel dangling from the peak—a red flannel goblin always smelling of camphor and spirits of turpentine. Sometimes—and those were rare nights—the red goblin remained away, and then Little Crotchet could sleep and dream the most beautiful dreams.

But usually, as soon as night had fallen on the plantation and there was no longer any noise in the house, the little red goblin, with his peaked green hat, would open the door gently and peep in to see whether the lad was asleep—and he knew at a glance whether Little Crotchet was sleeping or only feigning sleep. Sometimes the youngster would shut his eyes ever so tight, and lie as still as a mouse, hoping that the red goblin would go away. But the trick never succeeded. The red goblin was too smart for that. If there was a blaze in the fireplace he would wink at it very solemnly; if not, he'd wink at the candle. And he never was in any hurry. He'd sit squat on the floor for many long moments. Sometimes he'd run and jump in the bed with Little Crotchet and then jump out again. Sometimes he'd pretend he was going to jump in the bed, when suddenly another notion would strike him, and he'd turn and run out at the door, and not come back again for days.

But this was unusual. Night in and night out, the year round, the red goblin rarely failed to show himself in little Crotchet's room, and crawl under the cover with the lad. There was but one person in all that region whom the red goblin was afraid of, and that was Aaron. But he was an obstinate goblin. Frequently he'd stay after Aaron came, and try his best to fight it out with the Son of Ben Ali; but in the end he would have to go. There were times, however, when Aaron could not respond to Little Crotchet's signal of distress,—the light in the dormer window,—and at such times the red goblin would have everything his own way. He would stay till all the world was awake, and then sneak off to his hiding-place, leaving Little Crotchet weak and exhausted.

THE GOBLIN PAIN

Thus it happened that, while Chunky Riley was taking an unexpected ride on the White Pig, and afterward while the three men were sitting on the pasture fence beyond the spring, the red goblin was giving Little Crotchet a good deal of trouble. No matter which way he turned in bed, the red goblin was there. He was there when Aaron came into the flower garden. He was there when Aaron stood at the foot of the great oak at the corner of the house. He was there when Aaron put forth his hand, felt for and found one of the iron spikes that had been driven into the body of the oak. The red goblin was in bed with Little Crotchet and tugging at his back and legs when Aaron pulled himself upward by means of the iron spike; when he found another iron spike; when, standing on and holding to these spikes, he walked up the trunk of the tree as if it were a ladder; and when he went into Little Crotchet's room by way of the dormer window. The real name of the red goblin with the green hat was Pain, as we know, and he was very busy with Little Crotchet this night; and though the lad had fallen into a doze, he was moving restlessly about when Aaron entered the room. The Son of Ben Ali stepped to the low bed, and knelt by it, placing his hand that the night winds had cooled on Little Crotchet's brow, touching it with firm but gentle strokes. The lad awoke with a start, saw that Aaron was near, and then closed his eyes again.

"It's a long way for you to come," he said. "There's a lot of things for you in the basket there."

"If twice as long, it would be short for me," replied Aaron. Then, still stroking Little Crotchet's brow with one hand, and gently rubbing his body with the other, the Son of Ben Ali told of Chunky Riley's ride on the White Pig. With his eyes closed, the lad could see the whole performance, and he laughed with so much heartiness that Aaron laughed in sympathy. This was such a rare event that Little Crotchet opened his eyes to see it, but soon closed them again, for now he felt that the red goblin was preparing to go.

"I sent Chunky Riley," said Little Crotchet, after a while. "They're after you to-morrow—Jim Simmons and his hounds. And he has his catch-dog with him. I saw the dog to-day. He's named Pluto. He's big and black, and bob-tailed, and his ears have been cropped. Oh, I'm afraid they'll get you this time, Aaron. Why not stay here with me to-morrow, and the next day?"

"Here?" There was a note of surprise in Aaron's voice.

"Yes. What's to hinder you? I can keep everybody out of the room, except"—

"Except somebody," said Aaron, smiling. "No, no! The White-Haired Master is a good man. Good to all. He'd shake his head and say, 'Runaway hiding in my house! That's bad, bad!' No, Little Master, they'll not get Aaron. You sleep. To-morrow night I'll come. My clothes will be ripped and snagged. Have me a big needle and some coarse thread. I'll mend 'em here and while I'm mending I may tell a tale. I don't know. Maybe. You sleep."

Aaron was no mesmerist, but somehow, the red goblin being gone, Little Crotchet was soon in the land of dreams. Aaron remained by the bed to make sure the sleep was sound, then he rose, tucked the cover about the lad's shoulders (for the morning air was cool), blew out the candle, went out on the roof, closing the window sash after him, and in a moment was standing in the flower garden. There he found Rambler, the track dog, awaiting him, and together they passed out into the lot and went by the spring, where Aaron stooped and took another draught of the cool, refreshing water.

All this time the three men had been sitting on the pasture fence at the point where it intersected the path leading from the spring, and they were sitting there still. As Aaron started along this path, after leaving the spring, Rambler trotted on before, and his keen nose soon detected the presence of strangers. With a whine that was more than half a whistle, Rambler gave Aaron the signal to stop, and then went toward the fence. The situation became clear to him at once, and it was then that Chunky Riley and the three men had heard him bark. They called it barking, but it was a message to Aaron saying:—

"Lookout! lookout! Son of Ben Ali, look sharp! I see three—Grizzlies two, and another."

THE SPRING OF COOL REFRESHING WATER

There was nothing alarming in the situation. In fact, Aaron might have gone within hailing distance of the three men without discovery, for the spring lot was well wooded. If Mr. Addison Abercrombie had any peculiarity it was his fondness for trees. He could find something to admire in the crookedest scrub oak and in the scraggiest elm. He not only allowed the trees in the spring lot to stand, but planted others. Where Aaron stood a clump of black-jacks, covering a quarter of an acre, had sprung up some years before. They were now well-grown saplings and stood as close together, according to the saying of the negroes, as hairs on a hog's back. Through these Aaron slowly edged his way, moving very carefully, until he reached a point close enough to the three men to see and hear what was going on.

Standing in the black shadow of these saplings he made an important discovery. Chunky Riley, it will be remembered, suspected that the two Gossetts and Mr. Simmons were intent on capturing Aaron; but this was far from their purpose. They had no such idea. While Aaron stood listening, watching, he saw a tall shadow steal along the path. He heard the swish of a dress and knew it was a woman. The shadow stole along the path until it came to the three men on the fence and then it stopped.

"Well?" said Mr. Gossett sharply. "What did you see? Where did the nigger go? Don't stand there like you are deaf and dumb. Talk out!"

"I seed him come fum de spring, Marster, an' go up by de nigger cabins. But atter dat I ain't lay eyes on 'im."

"Did he go into the cabins?"

"I lis'n at eve'y one, Marster, an' I ain't hear no talkin' in but one."

"Was he in that one?"

"Ef he wuz, Marster, he wa'n't sayin' nothin'. Big Sal was talkin' wid Randall, suh."

"What were they talking about?"

"All de words I hear um say wuz 'bout der Little Marster—how good he is an' how he all de time thinkin' mo' 'bout yuther folks dan he do 'bout his own se'f."

"Humph!" snorted Mr. Gossett. Mr. Simmons moved about uneasily.

"Whyn't you go in an' see whether Aaron was in there?" asked George Gossett.

"Bekaze, Marse George, dey'd 'a' know'd right pine-blank what I come fer. 'Sides dat, Big Sal is a mighty bad nigger 'oman when she git mad."

"You're as big as she is," suggested Mr. Gossett.

"Yes, suh; but I ain't got de ambition what Big Sal got," replied the woman humbly.

"I'll tell you, Simmons, that runaway nigger is the imp of Satan," remarked Mr. Gossett.

"But, Colonel, if he's that, what do you want him caught for?" inquired Mr. Simmons humorously.

"Why, so much the more need for catching him. I want to get my hands on him. If I don't convert him, why, then you may go about among your friends and say that Gossett is a poor missionary. You may say that and welcome."

"I believe you!" echoed George.

"You may go home now," said Mr. Gossett to the woman.

"Thanky, Marster." She paused a moment to wipe her face with her apron, and then climbed over the fence and went toward the Gossett plantation.

Aaron slipped away from the neighborhood of the three men, crossed the fence near where Chunky Riley had been standing, went swiftly through the pasture for half a mile, struck into the plantation path some distance ahead of the woman, and then came back along the path to meet her. When he saw her coming he stopped, turned his back to her and stood motionless in the path. The woman was talking to herself as she came up; but when she saw Aaron she hesitated, advanced a step, and then stood still, breathing hard. All her superstitious fears were aroused.

"Who is you? Who is dat? Name er de Lord! Can't you talk? Don't be foolin' wid me! Man, who is you?"

"One!" replied Aaron. The sound of a human voice reassured her somewhat, but her knees shook so she could hardly stand.

"What yo' name?" she asked again.

"Too long a name to tell you."

"What you doin'?"

"Watching a child—looking hard at it."

"Wuz you, sho nuff?" She came a step nearer. "How come any chil' out dis time er night?"

"A black child," Aaron went on. "Its dress was afire. It went up and down the path here. It went across the hill. Crying and calling—calling and crying, 'Aaron! Aaron! Mammy's hunting for you! Aaron! Aaron! Mammy's telling on you.'"

"My Lord fum heaven!" moaned the woman; "dat wuz my chil'—de one what got burnt up kaze I wuz off in de fiel'." She threw her apron over her head, fell on her knees, and moaned and shuddered.

"Well, I'm Aaron. You hunted for me in the nigger cabins; you slipped to the fence yonder; you told three men you couldn't find me."

"O Lord! I wuz bleege ter do it. It wuz dat er take ter de woods, an' dey ain't no place fer me in de woods. What'd I do out dar by myse'f at night? I know'd dey couldn't ketch you. Oh, dat wuz my chil'!"

"Stand up!" Aaron commanded.

"What you gwine ter do?" the woman asked, slowly rising to her feet, and holding herself ready to dodge an expected blow—for, as she herself said, she was not at all "ambitious."

"Your breakfast is ready, and I've been waiting here to give it to you. Hold your apron."

The woman did as she was told, and Aaron took from the basket which Little Crotchet had given him four biscuits and as many slices of ham.

"I'll take um, an' thanky, too," said the woman; "but hongry as I is, I don't b'lieve I kin eat a mou'ful un um atter what I done. I'm too mean to live!"

"Get home! get home and forget it," Aaron replied.

"Oh, I can't go thoo dem woods atter what you tol' me!" cried the woman.

"I'll go with you," said Aaron. "Come!"

"You!" The woman lifted her voice until it sounded shrill on the moist air of the morning. "You gwine dar to Gossett's? Don't you know dey er gwine ter hunt you in de mornin'? Don't you know dey got de dogs dar? Don't you know some er de niggers'll see you—an' maybe de overseer? Don't you know you can't git away fum dem dogs fer ter save yo' life?"

"Come!" said Aaron sharply. "It's late."

"Min', now! ef dey ketch you, 't ain't me dat done it," the woman insisted.

"Come!—I must be getting along," was Aaron's reply.

He went forward along the path, and though he seemed to be walking easily, the woman had as much as she could do to keep near him. Though his body swayed slightly from side to side, he seemed to be gliding along rather than walking. Ahead of him, sometimes near, sometimes far, and frequently out of sight, a dark shadow moved and flitted. It was Rambler going in a canter. A hare jumped from behind a tussock and went skipping away. It was a tempting challenge. But Rambler hardly glanced at him. "Good-by, Mr. Rabbit! I'll see you another day!"

Thus Aaron, the woman, and Rambler went to Gossett's.

"Man, ain't you tired?" the woman asked when they came in sight of the negro quarters.

"Me? I'll go twenty miles before sun-up," replied Aaron.

"I'll never tell on you no mo'," said the woman; "not ef dey kills me." She turned to go to her cabin, when Aaron touched her on the shoulder.

"Wait!" he whispered. "If it brings more meat for your young ones, tell! Fetch the men here; show 'em where I stood,—if it brings you more meat for your babies."

"Sho nuff?" asked the woman, amazed. Aaron nodded his head. "What kind er folks is you?" she cried. "You ain't no nigger. Dey ain't no nigger on top er de groun' dat'd stan' up dar an' talk dat away. Will dey ketch you ef I tell?" The woman was thinking about the meat.

Aaron lifted his right hand in the air, turned, and disappeared in the darkness, which was now changing to the gray of dawn. The woman remained where she was standing for some moments as if considering some serious problem. Then she shook her head.

"I'd git de meat—but dey mout ketch 'im, an' den what'd I look like?"

This remark seemed to please her, for she repeated it more than once before moving out of her tracks. When she did move, she went to her cabin, kindled a fire, cooked something for her children,—she had three,—placed a biscuit and a piece of ham for each, and, although she had not slept a wink, prepared to go to the field. It was almost time, too, for she heard the hog feeder in the horse lot talking angrily to the mules, as he parceled out their corn and forage. Presently she heard him calling the hogs to get a bite of corn,—the fattening hogs that were running about in the horse lot.

Soon, too, she heard the sharp voice of Mr. Gossett, her master, calling to the hog feeder. And you may be sure the man went as fast as his legs could carry him. Get out of the way, dogs, chickens, wheelbarrows, woodpile, everything, and let the negro run to his master! Had he seen the horses? Oh, yes, Marster, that he had! They were standing at the lot gate, and they whickered and whinnied so that he was obliged to go and see what the trouble was. And there were the horses, Mr. Simmons's among the rest. Yes, Marster, and the hog feeder was just on the point of alarming the neighborhood, thinking something serious had happened, when the thought came to his mind that the horses had grown tired of waiting and had broken loose from their fastenings. Oh, yes, Marster, they would do that way sometimes, because horses have a heap of sense, especially Marster's horses. When one broke loose the others wanted to follow him, and then they broke loose too. And they were fed,—eating right now, and all fixed up. Saddle 'em by sun-up? Yes, Marster, and before that if you want 'em, for they've already had a right smart snack of corn and good clean fodder.

As for Aaron, he had far to go. He had no fear of Mr. Gossett's hounds, but he knew that he would

have some difficulty in getting away from those that Mr. Simmons had trained. If he could outmanœuvre them, that would be the best plan. If not,—well, he would make a stand in the swamp. But there was the crop-eared, bob-tailed cur—the catch dog—that was the trouble. Aaron knew, too, that Mr. Simmons was a professional negro hunter, and that he naturally took some degree of pride in it. Being a professional, with a keen desire to be regarded as an expert, it was to be supposed that Mr. Simmons had made a study of the tactics of fugitive negroes.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Simmons was a very shrewd man; he was also, in spite of his calling, a very kind-hearted man. In his soul he despised Mr. Gossett, whose negroes were constantly in the woods, and loved and admired Addison Abercrombie, whose negroes never ran away, and who, if every slave on his plantation were a fugitive, would never call on Mr. Simmons to catch them.

Aaron was far afield when, as the sun rose, Mr. Gossett's hog feeder called the house girl and asked her to tell Mr. Gossett that the horses were saddled and ready at the front gate. Then Mr. Simmons's dogs, which had been shut up in the carriage house, were turned out and fed. The hounds were given half-cooked corn meal, but the catch dog, Pluto, must needs have a piece of raw meat, which he swallowed at one gulp. This done, Mr. Simmons blew one short, sharp note on his horn, and the hunt for Aaron began.

V.

THE HUNT BEGINS.

When Aaron left the negro woman at Gossett's he went rapidly through the woods until he came to the old fields that had once been cultivated, but were now neglected for newer and better soil. These deserted fields had been dismally naked of vegetation for years, and where they undulated into hills the storms had cut deep red gashes. But these wounds were now gradually healing. A few years before a company of travelers had camped out one night at Curtwright's factory, not many miles away, and where they fed their horses a grass new to that region—new, in fact, to this country—made its appearance. It grew and spread for miles around and covered the red hills with the most beautiful mantle that the southern summers had ever seen. It refused to wither and parch under the hot sun, but flourished instead.

It had crept from Curtwright's factory, and had already begun to carpet the discarded lands through which Aaron was now passing, and the turf felt as soft as velvet under his feet. The touch of it seemed to inspire his movements, for he began to trot; and he trotted until, at the end of half an hour, he struck into the plantation road leading to the Oconee. Aaron was making for the river. Having received fair warning, and guessing something of the character of Mr. Simmons, he had made up his mind that the best plan would be to get away from the dogs if possible.

He hoped to find one of the Ward negroes at the river landing, and in this he was not disappointed. Old Uncle Andy, who was almost on the retired list, on account of his age and faithfulness, although he was still strong and vigorous, was just preparing to visit his set-hooks which were down the river. He was about to shove the boat into deep water and jump in when Aaron called him.

"Ah-yi," he answered in a tone almost gay, for he had a good master, and he had no troubles except the few that old age had brought on him.

"Up or down?" inquired Aaron.

"Down, honey; down. All de time down. Den I'll lef' um down dar an' let Rowan Ward" (this was his master whom he talked about so familiarly) "sen' one er his triflin' no 'count nigners atter um wid de waggin'."

"I want to go up," said Aaron.

"I ain't henderin' you," replied old Uncle Andy. "Whar yo' huffs? Walk. I ain't gwine pull you in dis boat. No. I won't pull Rowan Ward yit, en he know it. I won't pull nobody up stream in his boat less'n it's Sally Ward" (his mistress), "en she'd do ez much fer me. What yo' name, honey?"

"Aaron, I'm called."

"Ah-yi!" exclaimed Old Uncle Andy, under his breath. "Dey are atter you. Oh, yes! En what's mo' dey'll git you. En mo' dan dat, dey oughter git you! Dem Gossetts is rank pizen, en der niggers is pizen. A nigger what ain't got no better sense dan ter b'long ter po' white trash ain't got no business ter git good treatment. Look at me! Dey ain't nobody dast ter lay de weight er der han' on me. Ef dey do, dey got ter whip Sally Ward en Rowan Ward. You ain't bad ez dem yuther Gossett niggers, kaze you been in de woods en you er dar yit. Kensecontly you got one chance, en it's de onliest chance. Cross dis river en go up dar ter de house, en wake up Sally Ward en tell 'er dat ole Andy say she mus' buy you. Ef she hum en haw, des put yo' foot down en tell her dat ole Andy say she des got ter buy you. She'll do it! She'll know better'n not ter do it. Ah-h-h-h!"

Aaron would have laughed at this display of self-importance, but he knew that to laugh would be to defeat the object he had in view. So his reply was very serious.

"She's good!" cried old Uncle Andy. "Dey's er heap er good wimmen, but dey ain't no 'oman like Sally Ward,—I don't keer ef she is got a temper. Ef folks is made out'n dus' dey wuz des nuff er de kin' she wuz made out'n fer ter make her. Dey wuz de greates' plenty fer ter make her, but dey wan't a pinch lef' over. How come you got ter go up de river?"

"Wait a little while, and Simmons's dog'll tell you," replied Aaron.

"Jim Simmons? I wish I had Rowan Ward here ter do my cussin'!" exclaimed old Uncle Andy, striking the edge of the bateau viciously. "Kin you handle dish yer paddle? Git in dis boat, den! Jim Simmons! Much he look like ketchin' anybody. Git in dis boat, I tell you! En take dis paddle en he'p me pull ef you want to go up de river."

Aaron lost no time in getting in the bateau. Instead of sitting down he remained standing, and braced himself by placing one foot in advance of the other. In this position he leaned first on one side and then on the other as he swept the long, wide oar through the water. A few strokes carried him into the middle of the Oconee and nearly across. Then, out of the current and in the still water, Aaron headed the boat up stream. It was a long, heavy, unwieldy affair, built for carrying the field hands and the fruits of the harvest across the river, for the Ward plantation lay on both sides of the Oconee. The bateau was unwieldy, but propelled by Aaron's strong arms it moved swiftly and steadily up the stream. Old Uncle Andy had intended to help row the boat, but when he saw how easily Aaron managed it he made himself comfortable by holding his oar across his lap and talking.

"I done year tell er you," he said. "Some folks say you er nigger, en some say you ain't no nigger. I'm wid dem what say you ain't no nigger, kaze you don't do like a nigger, en dey ain't no nigger

in de roun' worl' what kin stan' up in dis boat an' shove it 'long like you doin'. Dey all weak-kneed en wobbly when dey git on de water. I wish Sally Ward could see you now. She'd buy you terreckly. Don't you want ter b'long ter Sally Ward?"

"No,—Abercrombie," replied Aaron.

"Yo' sho fly high," remarked old Uncle Andy. "Dey er good folks, dem Abercrombies. Ef dey's anybody anywheres 'roun' dat's mos' ez good ez Sally Ward en Rowan Ward it's de Abercrombies. I'll say dat much an' not begrudge it. Speshally dat ar cripple boy. Dey tells me dat dat chil' don't never git tired er doin' good. En dat's a mighty bad sign; it's de wust kinder sign. You watch. De Lord done put his han' on dat chil', en he gwine take 'im back up dar whar he b'longs at. When folks git good like dey say dat chil' is, dey are done ripe."

To this Aaron made no reply. He had had the same or similar thoughts for some time. He simply gave the waters of the river a stronger backward sweep with the oar. The shadows were still heavy on the water, and the overhanging trees helped to make them heavier, but the reflection of dawn caught and became entangled in the ripples made by the boat, and far away in the east the red signal lights of the morning gave forth a dull glow.

The fact that Aaron made no comment on his remarks had no effect on Uncle Andy. He continued to talk incessantly, and when he paused for a moment it was to take breath and not to hear what his companion had to say.

"Jim Simmons. Huh. I wish Sally Ward could git de chance fer ter lay de law down ter dat man." (Uncle Andy had his wish later in the day). "She'd tell 'im de news. She'd make 'im 'shamed er hisse'f—gwine trollopin' roun' de country huntin' niggers en dem what ain't niggers, en all b'longin' ter Gossett. How come dey ain't no niggers but de Gossett niggers in de woods? Tell me dat. You may go all 'roun' here for forty mile, en holler at eve'y plantation gate en ax 'em how many niggers dey got in de woods, en dey'll tell you na'er one. Dey'll tell you ids twel you holler at de Gossett gate an' dar dey'll holler back: Forty-'leven in de woods an' spectin' mo' ter foller. Now, how come dat? When you stoop in de road fer ter git a drink er water you kin allers tell when dey's sump'n dead up de creek."

Still Aaron swept the water back with his oar, and still the bateau went up stream. One mile—two miles—two miles and a half. At last Aaron headed the boat toward the shore.

"What you gwine ter lan' on the same side wid Jim Simmons fer?" Uncle Andy inquired indignantly. "Ain't you got no sense? Don't you know he'll ketch you ef you do dat? You reckon he gwine ter foller you ter de landin' en den turn right 'roun' in his tracks en go back?"

"I'll hide in the big swamp," replied Aaron.

"Hide!" exclaimed Uncle Andy. "Don't you know dey done foun' out whar you stays at? A'er one er dem Gossett niggers'll swap der soul's salvation fer a bellyful er vittles. Ef dey wuz ter ketch you des dry so, I'd be sorry fer you, but ef you gwine ter run right in de trap, you'll hatter fin' some un else fer ter cry atter you. You put me in min' er de rabbit. Man come 'long wid his dogs, en jump de rabbit out er his warm bed, en he done gone. Dogs take atter him, but dey ain't nowhar. He done out er sight. Den dey trail 'im en trail 'im, but dat ain't do no good. Rabbit done gone. De man, he let de dogs trail. He take his stan' right at de place whar rabbit jump fum. He prime he gun, en wink he eye. De dogs trail, en trail, en trail, en it seem like dey gwine out er hearin'. Man stan' right still en wink de t'er eye. En, bless gracious! 'fo' you know it, *bang* go de gun en down drap de rabbit. Stidder gwine on 'bout his business, he done come back en de man bag 'im. Dat 'zackly de way you gwine do—but go on, go on! De speckled pullet hollered shoo ter hawk, but what good did dat do?"

By this time the bateau had floated under a tree that leaned from the river bank over the water. Aaron laid his oar in the boat and steadied it by holding to a limb. Then he turned to Uncle Andy.

"Maybe some day I can help you. So long!"

He lifted himself into the tree. As he did so a dog ran down the bank whining. "Wait!" cried Uncle Andy. "Wait, en look out! I hear a dog in de bushes dar. Ef it's a Simmons dog drap back in de boat en I'll take you right straight to Sally Ward."

"It's my dog," said Aaron. "He's been waiting for me." It was Rambler.

"Desso! I wish you mighty well, honey." With that Uncle Andy backed the boat out into the river, headed it down stream, and aided the current by an occasional stroke of his oar, which he knew well how to use.

Standing on the hill above the river, Aaron saw that the red signal lights in the east had been put out, and it was now broad day. In the top of a pine a quarter of a mile away a faint shimmer of sunlight glowed a moment and then disappeared. Again it appeared and this time to stay. He stood listening, and it seemed to him that he could hear in the far-off distance the faint musical cry of hounds. Perhaps he was mistaken; perhaps it was a fox-hunting pack, or, perhaps—

He turned and moved rapidly to the Swamp, which he found wide awake and ready to receive him. So vigorous was the Swamp, and so jealous of its possessions, that it rarely permitted the summer sun to shine upon its secrets. If a stray beam came through, very well, but the Swamp never had a fair glimpse of the sun except in winter, when the glare was shorn of its heat, all the shadows pointing to the north, where the cold winds come from. At midday, in the season when the Swamp was ready for business, the shade was dense—dense enough to give the effect of twilight. At sunrise dawn had hardly made its way to the places where the mysteries wandered back and forth, led by Jack-o'-the-Lantern. But the Willis-Whistlers knew when dawn came in the

outer world, and they hid their shrill pipes in the canes and disappeared; but the mysteries still had an hour to frolic—an hour in which they might dispense with the services of Jack-o'-the-Lantern. So Aaron found them there—all his old friends and a new one, the old brindle steer to whom he sometimes gave a handful of salt. The brindle steer was supposed to be superannuated, but he was not. He had the hollow horn, as the negroes called it, and this had made him thin and weak for a time, but he was now in fair trim, the Swamp proving to be a well-conducted hospital, stocked with an abundance of pleasant medicine. He was not of the Swamp, but he had been taken in out of charity, and he was the more welcome on that account. Moreover, he had introduced himself to the White Pig in a sugarcane patch, and they got on famously together—one making luscious cuds of the green blades and the other smacking his mouth over the sweets to be found in the stalks.

Aaron was glad to see the Brindle Steer, and Brindle was so glad to see Aaron that he must needs hoist his tail in the air and lower his horns, which were remarkably long and sharp, and pretend that he was on the point of charging, pawing the ground and making a noise with his mouth that was something between a bleat and a bellow. It was such a queer sound that Aaron laughed, seeing which Brindle shook his head and capered around the Son of Ben Ali as if trying to find some vulnerable point in his body that would offer small resistance to the long horns.

"You are well, Brindle," said Aaron.

"No, Son of Ben Ali, not well—only a great deal better," replied Brindle.

"That is something, Brindle; be glad, as I am," remarked Aaron. "You may have work to do to-day—with your horns."

Brindle drew a long breath that sounded like a tremendous sigh. "It is well you say with my horns, Son of Ben Ali. No cart for me. When the time comes for the cart I shall have—what do you call it?"

"The hollow horn," suggested Aaron.

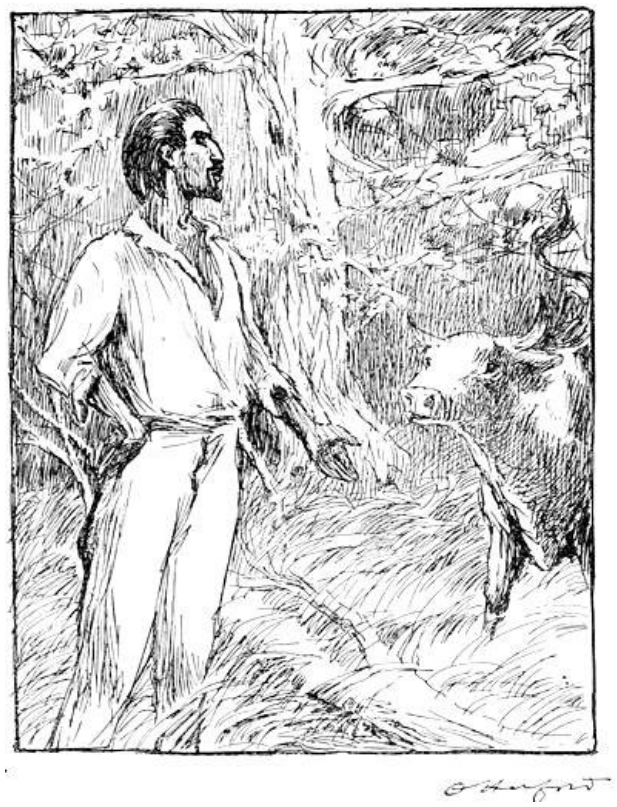
"Yes, two hollow horns, Son of Ben Ali. No cart for me. Though there is nothing the matter with my horns, the people shall believe that both are hollow. When I was sick, Son of Ben Ali, something was the matter with all nine of my stomachs."

"Nine! You have but three, Brindle," said Aaron.

"Only three, Son of Ben Ali? Well, when I was sick I thought there were nine of them. What am I to do to-day?"

"Go not too far, Brindle. When you hear hounds running through the fields from the river come to the big poplar. There you will find me and the White Grunter."

"I'm here, Son of Ben Ali, and here I stay. All night I have fed on the sprouts of the young cane, and once I waded too far in the quagmire. I'm tired. I'll lie here and chew my cud. But no yoke, Son of Ben Ali, and no cart." Whereupon old Brindle made himself comfortable by lying down and chewing his cud between short pauses.



BRINDLE AND AARON

Meanwhile Mr. Jim Simmons, accompanied only by George Gossett (the father had turned back in disgust soon after the chase began), was galloping across the country in a somewhat puzzled frame of mind.

When Mr. Simmons had given one short blast on his horn to warn his dogs that a hunt was on the programme, the three men rode along the plantation path toward the Abercrombie place.

"Now, Colonel," remarked Mr. Simmons as they started out, "I want you to keep your eyes on that red dog. It'll be worth your while."

"Is that Sound?" George Gossett asked.

"Well, sometimes I call him Sound on account of his voice, and sometimes I call him Sandy on account of his color, but just you watch his motions." Pride was in the tone of Mr. Simmons's voice.

The dog was trotting in the path ahead of the horse. Suddenly he put his nose to the ground and seemed to be so delighted at what he found there that his tail began to wag. He lifted his head, and ran along the path for fifty yards or more. Then he put his nose to the ground again, and kept it there as he cantered along the narrow trail. Then he began to trot, and finally, with something of a snort, turned and ran back the way he had come. He had not given voice to so much as a whimper.

"Don't he open on track?" asked George Gossett.

"He'll cry loud enough and long enough when he gets down to business," Mr. Simmons explained. "Just you keep your eyes on him."

"Fiddlesticks. He's tracking us," exclaimed Mr. Gossett contemptuously.

"But, Colonel, if he is, I'm willing to take him out and kill him, and, as he stands, I would take no man's hundred dollars for him. I'll see what he's up to."

Suiting the action to the word, Mr. Simmons turned his horse's head and galloped after Sound, who was now moving rapidly, followed by all the expectant dogs. Nothing was left for the two Gossetts to do but to follow Mr. Simmons, though the elder plainly showed his indignation, not only by his actions, but by the use of a few words that are either too choice or too emphatic to be found in a school dictionary.

Sound ran to the point where Aaron and the woman had stopped. He followed the woman's scent to her cabin; but this not proving satisfactory, he turned and came back to where the two had stood. There he picked up Aaron's scent, ran around in a small circle, and then, with a loud, wailing cry, as if he had been hit with a cudgel, he was off, the rest of the dogs joining in, their cries making a musical chorus that fell on the ear with a lusty, pleasant twang as it echoed through the woods.

"Wait," said Mr. Gossett, as Mr. Simmons made a movement to follow the dogs. "This is a fool's errand you are starting on. The nigger we're after wouldn't come in a mile of this place. It's one of the Spivey niggers the dogs are tracking. Or one of the Ward niggers. I'm too old to go galloping about the country just to see the dogs run. George, you can go if you want to, but I'd advise you to go in the house and go to bed. That's what I'll do. Simmons, if you catch the right nigger, well and good. If I thought the dogs were on his track, I'd ride behind them the balance of the week. But it's out of reason. We know where the nigger goes, and the dogs haven't been there."

"I'll risk all that, Colonel. If we don't come up with the nigger, why, it costs nobody nothing," remarked Mr. Simmons.

"I'll go along and see the fun, pap," said George.

"Well, be back by dinner time. I want you to do something for me."

Mr. Gossett called a negro and had his horse taken, while George and Mr. Simmons galloped after the hounds, which were now going out of the woods into the old, worn-out fields beyond. As Mr. Simmons put it, they were "running pretty smooth." They were not going as swiftly as the modern hounds go, but they were going rapidly enough to give the horses as much work as they wanted to do.

The hounds were really after Aaron. Mr. Simmons suspected it, but he didn't know it. He was simply taking the chances. But his hopes fell as the dogs struck into the plantation road leading to the river. "If they were after the runaway, what on earth did he mean by going in this direction?" Mr. Simmons asked himself. He knew the dogs were following the scent of a negro, and he knew the negro had been to the Abercrombie place, but more than this he did not know.

Then it occurred to him that a runaway with some sense and judgment might be expected to go to the river, steal a bateau, and float down stream to avoid the hounds. He had heard of such tricks in his day and time, and his hopes began to rise. But they fell again, for he suddenly remembered that the negro who left the scent which the hounds were following could not possibly have known that he was to be hunted with dogs, consequently he would not be going to the river to steal a boat. But wait! Another thought struck Mr. Simmons. Didn't the Colonel send one of his nigger women to the quarters on the Abercrombie plantation? He surely did. Didn't the woman say she had seen the runaway? Of course she did. Weren't the chances ten to one that when she saw him she told him that Simmons would be after him in the morning? Exactly so! The

result of this rapid summing up of the situation was so satisfactory to Mr. Simmons that he slapped the pommel of his saddle and cried:—

"By jing, I've got him!"

"Got who?" inquired George Gossett, who was riding close up.

"Wait and see!" replied Mr. Simmons.

"Oh, I'll wait," said young Gossett, "and so will you."

VI.

THE HUNT ENDS.

It will be seen that Mr. Jim Simmons, in his crude way, was a very shrewd reasoner. He didn't "guess;" he "reckoned," and it cannot be denied that he came very near the truth. You will remember that when we children play hide-the-switch the one that hides it guides those who are hunting for it by making certain remarks. When they are near where the switch is hid, the hider says, "You burn; you are afire," but when they get further away from the hiding-place the word is, "You are cold; you are freezing." In hunting for Aaron, Mr. Jim Simmons was burning, for he had come very close to solving the problem that the fugitive had set for him.

Mr. Simmons was so sure he was right in his reasoning that he cheered his dogs on lustily and touched up his horse. George Gossett did the same, and dogs, horses, and men went careering along the plantation road to the river landing. The sun was now above the treetops, and the chill air of the morning was beginning to surrender to its influence. The course of the river was marked out in mid-air by a thin line of white mist that hung wavering above the stream.

The dogs ran crying to the landing, and there they stopped. One of the younger hounds was for wading across; but Sound, the leader, knew better than that. He ran down the river bank a hundred yards and then circled back across the field until he reached a point some distance above the landing. Then he returned, his keen nose always to the ground. At the landing he looked across the river and whined eagerly.

Mr. Simmons seemed to be very lucky that morning, for just as he and George Gossett galloped to the landing a boatload of field hands started across from the other side, old Uncle Andy coming with it to row it back. On the other side, too, Mr. Simmons saw a lady standing,—a trim figure dressed in black,—and near her a negro boy was holding a horse that she had evidently ridden to the landing. This was the lady to whom Uncle Andy sometimes referred as Sally Ward, and for whom he had a sincere affection. The river was not wide at the landing, and the boatload of field hands, propelled by four muscular arms, was not long in crossing. As the negroes jumped ashore Sound went among them and examined each one with his nose, but he returned to the landing and looked across and whined. They saluted Mr. Simmons and George Gossett politely, and then went on their way, whistling, singing, and cracking jokes, and laughing loudly.

"Was a bateau missing from this side this morning?" Mr. Simmons asked Uncle Andy.

"Suh?" Uncle Andy put his hand to his ear, affecting to be very anxious to hear what Mr. Simmons had said.

The question was repeated, whereat Uncle Andy laughed loudly.

"You sho is a witch fer guessin', suh! How come you ter know 'bout de missin' boat?"

Mr. Simmons smiled under this flattery. "I thought maybe a boat would be missing from this side this morning," he said.

"Dey sho wuz, suh; but I dunner how de name er goodness you come ter know 'bout it, kaze I wuz on de bank cross dar 'fo' 't wuz light, en I ain't see you on dis side. Yes, suh! De boat wuz gone. Dey foun' it 'bout a mile down de river, en on account er de shoals down dar, dey had ter take it out'n de water en fetch it back yer in de waggin. Yes, suh! dish yer de very boat."

"Where's the ford?" Mr. Simmons inquired. "I used to know, but I've forgotten."

"Right below yer, suh!" replied Uncle Andy. "You'll see de paff whar de stock cross at. B'ar down stream, suh, twel you halfway cross, den b'ar up. Ef you do dat you won't git yo' stirrup wet."

The ford was easily found, but the crossing was not at all comfortable. In fact, Uncle Andy had maliciously given Mr. Simmons the wrong directions. The two men rode into the water, bore down the stream, and their horses were soon floundering in deep water. They soon touched bottom again, and in a few moments they were safe on the opposite bank,—safe, but dripping wet and in no very good humor. Mr. Simmons's dogs, obedient to his call, followed his horse into the water and swam across.

Sound clambered out, shook himself, and ran back to the landing where the lady was waiting for the boat to return. It had been Mr. Simmons's intention to proceed at once down the river to the point where the boat had been found, and where he was sure the dogs would pick up the scent of the runaway; but he found that the way was impossible for horses. He must needs go to the landing and inquire the way.

Uncle Andy had just made the middle seat in the bateau more comfortable for his mistress by placing his coat, neatly folded, on the hard plank, and Mrs. Ward was preparing to accept the old negro's invitation to "git aboard, mistiss," when Mr. Simmons and George Gossett rode up. Both raised their hats as the lady glanced toward them. They were hardly in a condition to present themselves, Mr. Simmons explained, and then he inquired, with as much politeness as he could command, how to reach the place where the missing boat had been found.

"The missing boat? Why, I never heard of it till now. Was one of the bateaux missing this morning?" the lady asked Uncle Andy.

"Yessum. When de fishin' good en de niggers put out der set-hooks, dey ain't many mornin's in de week dat one er de yuther er deze boats ain't missin'!"

"I never heard of it before."

"No, mistiss; de boys 'low you wouldn't keer nohow. Dey runs um over de shoals, en dar dey leaves um."

"But both bateaux are here."

"Yessum. We fetches um back 'roun' by de road in de waggin."

"Who carried the bateau over the shoals this morning?"

"Me, ma'am. Nobody ain't know nuttin' 'bout it but de two Elliks, en when dat ar gemmun dar ax me des now if dey wa'n't a boat missin' fum 'roun' yer dis mornin' hit sorter flung me back on myse'f. I 'low 'Yes, suh,' but he sho flung me back on myse'f."

Uncle Andy began to chuckle so heartily that his mistress asked him what he was laughing at, though she well knew.

"I hit myse'f on de funny bone, mistiss, en when dat's de case I bleege ter laugh."

At this the lady laughed, and it was a genial, merry, and musical laugh. Mr. Simmons smiled, but so grimly that it had the appearance of a threat.

"And so this is Mr. Simmons, the famous negro hunter?" said Mrs. Ward. "Well, Mr. Simmons, I'm glad to see you. I've long had something to say to you. Whenever you are sent for to catch one of my negroes I want you to come straight to the house on the hill yonder and set your dogs on me. When one of my negroes goes to the woods, you may know it's my fault."

"Trufe, too!" remarked Uncle Andy, under his breath, but loud enough for all to hear.

"That may be so, ma'am," replied Mr. Simmons; "but among a passel of niggers you'll find some bad ones. What little pleasure I get out of this business is in seeing and hearing my dogs run. Somebody's got to catch the runaways, and it might as well be me as anybody."

"Why, certainly, Mr. Simmons. You have become celebrated. Your name is trumpeted about in all the counties round. You are better known than a great many of our rising young politicians."

The lady's manner was very gracious, but there was a gleam of humor in her eye. Mr. Simmons didn't know whether she was laughing at him or paying him a compliment; but he thought it would be safe to change the subject.

"May I ask the old man there a few questions?" he inquired.

"Why, certainly," Mrs. Ward responded. "Cross-examine him to your heart's content. But be careful about it, Mr. Simmons. He's old and feeble, and his mind is not as good as it used to be. I heard him telling the house girl last night that he was losing his senses."

"De lawsy massy, mistiss! You know I wuz des projickin' wid dat gal. Dey ain't any na'er nigger in de country got any mo' sense dan what I got. You know dat yo'se'f."

"Was anybody with you in the bateau when you went down the river this morning?"

"Yes, suh, dey wuz," replied Uncle Andy solemnly.

"Who was it?"

"Well, suh"—

"Don't get excited, now, Andrew," his mistress interrupted. "Tell Mr. Simmons the truth. You know your weakness."

If Uncle Andy's skin had been white or even brown, Mr. Simmons would have seen him blushing violently. He knew his mistress was making fun of him, but he was not less embarrassed on that account. He looked at Mrs. Ward and laughed.

"Speak right out," said the lady. "Who was with you in the bateau?"

"Little Essek, ma'm,—my gran-chil'. I'm bleedge ter have some un long fer ter hol' de boat steady when I go ter look at my set-hooks. Little Essek wuz de fust one I see, en I holler'd at 'im."

"Did anybody cross from the other side this morning?" asked Mr. Simmons.

"Not dat I knows un, less'n it wuz Criddle's Jerry. He's got a wife at de Abercrombie place. He fotch Marse Criddle's buggy to be worked on at our blacksmif shop, en he rid de mule home dis mornin'. Little Essek had 'er down yer 'bout daylight waitin' fer Jerry, kaze he say he got ter be home soon ef not befo'."

Uncle Andy had an imagination. Jerry had brought the buggy and had ridden the mule home. He also had a wife at the Abercrombie place, but his master had given him no "pass" to visit her, thinking it might delay his return. For that reason Jerry did not cross the river the night before.

"And here we've been chasing Criddle's Jerry all the morning," remarked George Gossett to Mr. Simmons. "Pap was right."

"But what was the nigger doing at your place?" Mr. Simmons was still arguing the matter in his mind.

"Don't ask me," replied George Gossett.

"Dey ain't no 'countin' fer a nigger, suh," remarked Uncle Andy affably. "Dey ain't no 'countin' fer 'em when dey ol' ez I is, much less when dey young en soople like Criddle's Jerry."

Under the circumstances there was nothing for Mr. Simmons and young Gossett to do but to turn

short about and recross the river. It was fortunate for them that a negro boy was waiting to take Mrs. Ward's horse across the river. They followed him into the ford, and made the crossing without difficulty. Then the two men held a council of war. Uncle Andy had another name for it. "I wish you'd look at um jugglin'," he said to his mistress, as he helped her from the bateau.

George Gossett was wet, tired, and disgusted, and he would not hear to Mr. Simmons's proposition to "beat about the bushes" in the hope that the dogs would strike Aaron's trail. "We started wrong," he said. "Let's go home, and when we try for the nigger again, let's start right."

"Well, tell your father I'll be back the day after to-morrow if I don't catch his nigger. I'm obliged to go home now and change my duds if I don't strike a trail. It's a true saying that there's more mud than water in the Oconee. I'll take a short cut. I'll go up the river a mile or such a matter and ride across to Dawson's old mill road. That will take me home by dinner time."

As it happened, Mr. Simmons didn't take dinner at home that day, nor did he return to Gossett's at the time he appointed.

He called his dogs and turned his horse's head up stream. He followed the course of the river for a mile or more, and then bore away from it. While he was riding along, lost in his reflections, he suddenly heard Sound giving tongue far ahead. That sagacious dog had unexpectedly hit on Aaron's trail, and he lost no time in announcing the fact as loudly as he could. Mr. Simmons was very much surprised.

"If that blamed dog is fooling me this time I'll feel like killing him," he remarked to himself. The rest of the dogs joined in, and they were all soon footing it merrily in the direction of the big swamp.

The blue falcon, circling high in the air, suddenly closed her wings and dropped into the leafy bosom of the Swamp. This was the first messenger. That red joker, the Fox Squirrel, had heard the wailing cry of the hounds, and scampered down the big pine. Halfway down he made a flying leap into the live oak, and then from tree to tree he went running, scrambling, jumping.

But let him go never so fast, the blue falcon was before him, and let the blue falcon swoop never so swiftly, the message was before her. For the White Grunter had ears. Ooft! he had heard the same wailing sound when the hounds were after him before he was old enough to know what his tusks were for. And Rambler had ears. In fact, the Swamp itself had ears, and for a few moments it held its breath (as the saying is) and listened. Listened intently,—and then quietly, cautiously, and serenely began to dispose of its forces. Near the big poplar Aaron had a pile of stones. They had been selected to fit his hand; they were not too large nor too small; they were not too light nor too heavy. This pile of stones was Aaron's ammunition, and he took his stand by it.

The White Pig rose slowly from his bed of mud, where he had been wallowing, and shook himself. Then he scratched himself by rubbing his side against a beech-tree. The Brindle Steer slowly dragged himself through the canes and tall grass, and came to Aaron's tree, where he paused with such a loud sigh that Rambler jumped away.

"It is the track dogs," he said.

"Yes; I'm sorry," replied Aaron. "When the big black dog comes stand aside and leave him to me."

"Gooft! not if it's the one that chewed my ear," remarked the White Pig.

"I came this morning by the thunder-wood tree," said Aaron. "Hide in the grass near there, and when they pass come charging after them."

The dogs came nearer and nearer, and the Swamp could hear Mr. Simmons cheering them on. As for Mr. Simmons, he was sure of one thing—the dogs were trailing either a wildcat or a runaway. He had never trained them not to follow the scent of a wildcat, and he now regretted it; for his keen ear, alive to differences that would not attract the attention of those who had never made a study of the temperament of dogs, detected a more savage note in their cry than he was accustomed to hear. Nor did his ear deceive him. Sound was following the scent of Aaron, but his companions were trailing Rambler, who had accompanied Aaron, and this fact gave a fiercer twang to their cry.

When Aaron was going from Gossett's to the river landing, Rambler was not trotting at his heels, but scenting ahead, sometimes far to the right and at other times far to the left. But in going from the river to the Swamp it was otherwise. Rambler had to hold his head high to prevent Aaron's heel from striking him on the under jaw. His scent lay with that of the Son of Ben Ali.

For that reason Mr. Simmons was puzzled by the peculiar cry of the dogs. He had trained them not to follow the scent of hares, coons, and foxes, and if they were not trailing a runaway he knew, or thought he knew, that they must be chasing a wildcat. Pluto, the crop-eared catch dog, galloped by his master's horse. He was a fierce-looking brute, but Mr. Simmons knew that he would be no match for a wildcat.

IN THE SWAMP

When the dogs entered the Swamp Mr. Simmons tried to follow, but he soon found his way barred by the undergrowth, by the trailing vines, the bending trees, the rank canes. He must needs leave his horse or lead it when he entered the Swamp. He chose to do neither, but sat in his saddle and waited, Pluto waiting with him, ready to go in when the word was given.

When the hounds entered the Swamp they were in full cry. They struggled through the vines, the briers, and the canes, and splashed through the spreading arms of the lagoon. Suddenly they ceased to cry. Then Mr. Simmons heard a strange snarling and snapping, an ominous crashing, fierce snorting, and then howls and screams of pain from his hounds.

"A cat, by jing!" he exclaimed aloud. Intent on saving his hounds if possible, he gave Pluto the word, and that savage brute plunged into the Swamp with gleaming red jaws and eager eyes.

Mr. Simmons never really knew what happened to his hounds, but the Swamp knew. When they splashed past the White Pig that fierce guardian of the Swamp sprang from his lair and rushed after them. They tried hard to escape, but the hindmost was caught. The White Pig ran by his side for the space of three full seconds, then, lowering his head, he raised it again with a toss sidewise, and the hound was done for—ripped from flank to backbone as neatly as a butcher could have done it. Another was caught on the horn of the red steer and flung sheer into the lagoon. Sound, the leader, fell into Rambler's jaws, and some old scores were settled there and then. Pluto came charging blindly in. He saw the White Pig and made for him, experience telling him that a hog will run when a dog is after it; but experience did him small service here. The White Pig charged to meet him, seeing which Pluto swerved to one side, but he was not nimble enough. With a downward swoop and an upward sweep of his snout the White Pig caught Pluto under the shoulder with his tusk and gave him a taste of warfare in the Swamp. Another dog would have left the field, but Pluto had a temper. He turned and rushed at the White Pig, and the Swamp prepared to witness a battle royal. But just then there was a whizzing, zooning sound in the air, a thud, and Pluto tumbled over and fell in a heap. Aaron had ended the cur's career as suddenly as if he had been blown to pieces by a cannon. There was one stone missing from the store of ammunition at the foot of the big poplar.

Meanwhile, Rambler was worrying Sound, and the White Pig, seeing no other enemy in sight, went running to the scene of that fray. His onslaught was so furious that Rambler thought it good manners to get out of Grunter's way. So he loosed his hold on Sound, and jumped aside. Sound was still able to do some jumping on his own account, and he turned tail and ran, just as the White Pig was about to trample him under foot. But he was not quick enough to escape with a whole skin. The tusk of the White Pig touched him on the hind leg, and where it touched it tore.

Mr. Simmons had five dogs when he came to the Swamp. Sound came out to him after the morning's adventure, but had to be carried home across the saddle bow. Two days later another of the dogs went limping home. Three dogs were left in the Swamp. Mr. Simmons blew his horn, and called for some time, and then he slowly went his way.

He had a great tale to tell when he got home. His dogs had jumped a wildcat at the river, chased him to the Swamp, and there they found a den of wildcats. There was a great fight, but three of the dogs were killed, and the cats were so fierce that it was as much as Mr. Simmons could do to escape with his life. Indeed, according to his tale, the biggest cat followed him to the edge of the Swamp. And he told this moving tale so often that he really believed it, and felt that he was a sort of hero.

As for the Swamp, it had a rare frolic that night. All the mysteries came forth and danced, and the Willis-Whistlers piped as they had never piped before, and old Mr. Bullfrog joined in with his fine bass voice. And the next morning Mr. Buzzard, who roosted in the loblolly pine, called his sanitary committee together, and soon there was nothing left of Pluto and his companions to pester the Swamp.

VII.

AARON SEES THE SIGNAL.

The Swamp had a fine frolic on the night of the day that it routed Mr. Simmons's dogs, but Aaron was not there to see it. He knew that, for some days at least, he would be free from active pursuit. The only danger he would have to encounter would come from the patrollers,—the negroes called them "patterollers,"—who visited the various plantations at uncertain intervals. If he began to go about with too much confidence it was entirely possible he would run into the arms of the patrollers, and he would have small opportunity to escape. Therefore, while he knew that he would not be hunted by dogs for some time to come, he also knew he must be constantly on the alert to guard against surprises. The most active member of the patrol was George Gossett himself; and after he and his companions had visited Mr. Fullalove's distillery, which they never failed to do when they went patrolling, they were not in a condition to be entirely responsible for their actions. They had nothing to restrain them on such occasions except the knowledge that some of the owners of the negroes would jump at an excuse to hold them to personal account. And this was not a pleasant result to contemplate, especially after a night's spree.

For these reasons Aaron was much more anxious to elude George Gossett and the patrollers than he was to escape from Mr. Jim Simmons's hounds. He knew he must avoid the negro cabins, which were traps for the unwary when the patrollers were around, and he knew he must keep off the public road—the "big road," as it was called—and not venture too often on the frequently traveled plantation paths.

Young Gossett and his companions had a way of dismounting from their horses out of sight and hearing of the negro quarters on the plantations that lay on their "beat." Leaving the animals in charge of one man, they would cautiously post themselves at the various fence crossings and paths frequented by the negroes, and in this way capture all who were going to the negro quarters or coming away. If a negro had a "pass" or a permit from his master, well and good. If he had none—well, it would be a sorry night's frolic for him.

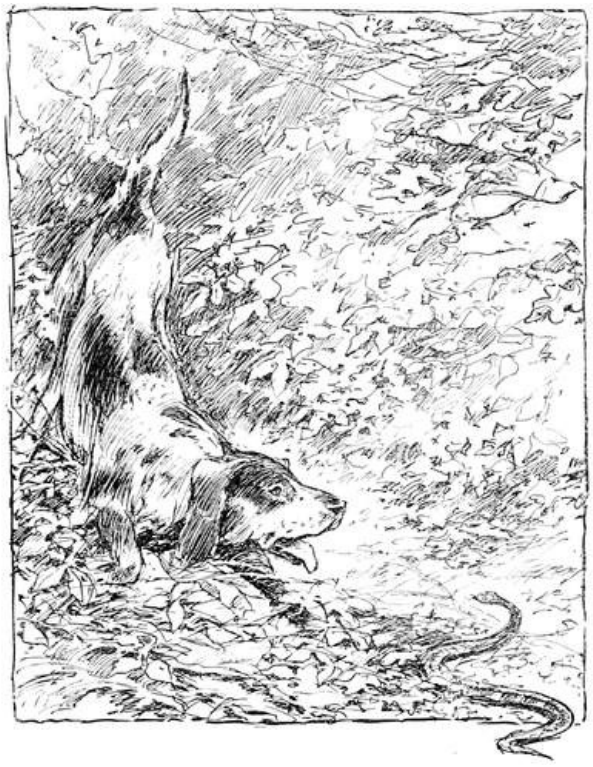
But Aaron had one great advantage over all the slaves who went to and fro between the plantations after nightfall. He had Rambler to warn him; and yet, after an experience that he had on one occasion, he felt that he must be more cautious than ever.

It happened not many weeks before he was hunted by Mr. Simmons's hounds. In trying to kill a moccasin, Rambler had the misfortune to be bitten by the serpent. The wound was on his jowl, and in spite of all that Aaron could do the poor dog's head and neck swelled fearfully. When night came the Son of Ben Ali made Rambler as comfortable as possible, bruising herbs and barks and binding them to the wound, and making him a soft bed.

On that particular night Aaron felt that he ought to visit the Little Master, and yet he was doubtful about it. He finally concluded to wait until late, and then go to the hill where, a few weeks later, he parted from Chunky Riley. If a light was shining behind the Little Master's curtain he would go and drive the red goblin, Pain, from the room.

He went to the hill, and the light was shining. The little red goblin was up to his old tricks. As he went along Aaron fell to thinking about the Little Master, and wondering why the child should be constantly given over to suffering. He forgot all about himself in trying to solve this problem, forgot to be cautious, forgot that he was a fugitive, and went blindly along the path to the fence above the spring lot. There, without warning, he found himself face to face with George Gossett. The rest of the patrollers were posted about at various points.

Perhaps George Gossett was as much surprised as Aaron. At any rate, he said nothing. He took a half-consumed cigar from his lips, and flipped the ashes from it. No doubt he intended to say something, yet he was in no hurry. His pistol was in his coat pocket, his hand grasped the handle, and his finger was on the trigger. He felt that he was prepared for any emergency—and so he was, except for the particular emergency that Aaron then and there invented.



RAMBLER'S FIGHT WITH THE MOCCASIN

The Son of Ben Ali took off his hat, to show how polite he was in the dark, advanced a step, and then suddenly plunged at young Gossett headforemost. Struck fairly in the pit of the stomach by this battering ram, the young man, who was not too sober to begin with, went down like a log, and Aaron ran away like a deer.

The worst of it was that when George Gossett recovered consciousness and was able to call his nearest companion to his assistance, that individual simply laughed at the amazing story.

"Why, it don't stand to reason," he said. "There ain't a living nigger that'd dast to do sech a thing, and the dead ones couldn't."

"Didn't you hear him when he butted me?" inquired young Gossett feebly.

"I heard you when you fell off the fence," replied the other. "I allowed that you had jumped down to let the blood git in your feet."

"I tell you," insisted the young man, "he come up so close I could 'a' put my hand on him. He took off his hat as polite as you please, and the next thing I know'd I didn't know nothing."

"Shucks!" exclaimed his companion as loudly as he dared to talk; "you jest about set up on the fence there and went to sleep, and fell off. I told you about them low-wines at the still; I told you when you was a-swilling 'em, same as a fattening hog, that if you didn't look out you'd have to be toted home. And here you are!"

Young Gossett had to go home, and as he was the leading spirit the rest had to go with him. He managed to sit his horse after a fashion, but it was as much as he could do. Once in the big road, his companions made many rough jokes at his expense, and they advised him never to tell such another tale as that if he didn't want the public at large to "hoot at him."

The adventure taught Aaron a new lesson in caution; and even now, after Mr. Simmons's famous pack of "nigger-dogs" had been all but destroyed, he felt that it was necessary to be more cautious than ever, even when Rambler accompanied him. He had no idea that Mr. Simmons thought his dogs had been attacked by wildcats. In fact, he thought that Mr. Simmons had full knowledge of his movements, and he was prepared any day to see Mr. Gossett gather his neighbors together, especially the young men, surround the swamp armed with shotguns, and try in that way to capture him.

But when night fell on the day of his experience with Mr. Simmons's dogs, he resolved to visit Little Crotchet. He was tired; he had traveled many miles, and had had little sleep, but sleep could be called at any time, and would come at the call. Only at night could he visit the Little Master. In the daytime he could stretch himself on a bed of fragrant pine-needles, with odorous heart-leaves for his pillow, and take his ease. So now, after all the turmoil and confusion he had experienced in field and wood, he went to the hill from which he could see the light in Little Crotchet's window.

Usually it was late before Aaron would venture to climb to the window, but there was one signal that made it urgent for him to go. When the light was suddenly extinguished and as suddenly relit, it was a signal that Aaron must come as soon as he could. This was Little Crotchet's invention and he thought a great deal of it. And it must be admitted that it was very simple and complete. Sitting on the hill, Aaron saw the light shining through the red curtain. Then it disappeared and the window remained dark for a minute. Then the light suddenly shone out again. The Arab glanced at the two stars that revolve around the north star, and judged it was not more than nine o'clock. What could the Little Master want at this early hour?

No need to ask that question; Little Crotchet had a great deal of business on hand. In the first place, while Mr. Simmons's hounds were hunting Aaron, Timoleon, the Black Stallion, had escaped from his stable, and he created a great uproar on the place. When the negro who usually fed and groomed him went into the lot to catch the horse, he found that the catcher is sometimes caught. For Timoleon, made furious by his freedom from the confinement of the halter and the four walls of the stable, seized the man by the shoulder and came near inflicting a fatal injury. Nothing saved the unfortunate negro but the fact that Randall, who chanced to be walking about the lot, made a pretense of attacking the horse with a wagon whip. Timoleon dropped the negro and made a furious rush at Randall; but Randall was in reach of the fence, and so made his escape, while the wounded negro took advantage of the opportunity to stagger, stumble, and crawl to a place of safety. This done, he lay as one dead. He was carried to his cabin, and a messenger was sent, hot-foot, for the doctor, who lived in the neighborhood not far away.

Little Crotchet witnessed a part of the scene, and, oh! he was angry. It was outrageous, wicked, horrible, that a horse should be so cruel. He sat on the Gray Pony and shook his fist impotently at the Black Stallion.

"Oh, if I had you where I could put the lash on you, I'd make you pay for this, you mean, cruel creature!"

Singular to say, Timoleon whinnied when he heard the Little Master's voice, and came galloping to the fence where the Gray Pony stood, and put his head over the top rail.

"Blest ef I don't b'lieve he know you, honey," said Randall.

This somewhat mollified Little Crotchet, but he was still angry. "Why are you so mean and cruel! Oh, I'll make somebody lash you well for this!"

The Black Stallion whinnied again in the friendliest way. "Is anybody ever see de beat er dat!" exclaimed Randall.

Nothing could be done, and so the Black Stallion roamed about the lot at will, and that night when the mules came in from the field they had to be fed and housed under the ginhouse shelter. The White-Haired Master was away from home on business, but the whole plantation knew that he prized Timoleon above all the other horses on the place, and so neither Turin nor Randall would take harsh measures to recapture the horse. They were careful enough, however, to have the high fence strengthened where they found it weak.

This was one of the reasons why Little Crotchet wanted to see Aaron. But there was also another reason. The lad wanted to introduce the runaway to a new friend of his, Mr. Richard Hudspeth, his tutor, who had been employed to come all the way from Massachusetts to take charge of the lad's education, which was already fair for his age. In fact, what Little Crotchet knew about books was astonishing when it is remembered that he never went to school. He had been taught to read and write and cipher by his mother, and this opened the door of his father's library, which was as large as it was well selected.

Mr. Hudspeth had been recommended by an old friend who had served two years in Congress with Mr. Abercrombie, and there was no trouble in coming to an agreement, for Mr. Hudspeth had reasons of his own for desiring to visit the South. He belonged to the anti-slavery society, and was an aggressive abolitionist. He was a fair-skinned young man, with a silk-like yellow beard, active in his movements, and had a voice singularly sweet and well modulated. He talked with great nicety of expression, and had a certain daintiness of manner which, in so far as it suggested femininity, was calculated to give the casual observer a wrong idea of Mr. Hudspeth's disposition and temperament.

He had been installed as Little Crotchet's tutor for more than a week. The lad did not like him at first. His preciseness seemed to smack too much of method and discipline,—the terror of childhood and youth. And there was a queer inflection to his sentences, and his pronunciation had a strange and an unfamiliar twang. But these things soon became familiar to the lad, as Mr. Hudspeth, little by little, won his attention and commanded his interest. The Teacher (for he was emphatically a Teacher in the best sense, and not a Tutor in any sense) saw at the beginning that the dull routine of the text-books would be disastrous here, both to health and spirits. And so he fell back on his own experience, and became himself the mouthpiece of all good books he had ever read, and of all great thoughts that had ever planted themselves in his mind. And he entered with real enthusiasm into all Little Crotchet's thoughts, and drew him out until the soul of the lad would have been no more clearly defined had every detail been painted on canvas and hung on the wall before the Teacher's eyes.

It was this Teacher that Little Crotchet wanted Aaron to see, a fact which, taken by itself, was sufficient evidence that the lad had grown fond of Mr. Hudspeth. Little Crotchet was very cunning about it, too. He invited the Teacher to come to his room after tea, and when Mr. Hudspeth came the lad, lying upon his bed, put the question plumply:—

"Do you want to see my runaway?"

"Your runaway? I don't understand you."

"Don't you know what a runaway is? Why, of course you do. A runaway negro."

"Ah! a fugitive slave. Yes; I have seen a few."

"But you've never seen my runaway at all. He isn't a negro. He's an Arab. I'll let you see him if you promise never to tell. It's a great secret. I'm so small, and—and so crippled, you know, nobody would ever think I had a runaway?"

"Never fear me. Do you keep him in a box and permit only your best friends to peep at him occasionally?"

"Oh, no," said Little Crotchet, laughing at the idea. "He's a sure-enough runaway. He's been advertised in the newspapers. And they had the funniest picture of him you ever saw. They made him look like all the rest of the runaways that have their pictures in the Milledgeville papers,—a little bit of a man, bare-headed and stooped over, carrying a cane on his shoulder with a bundle hanging on the end of it. Sister cut it out for me. I'll show it to you to-morrow."

Mr. Hudspeth was very much interested in the runaway, and said he would be glad to see him.

"Well, you must do as I tell you. If I could jump up and jump about I wouldn't ask you, you know. Take the candle in your hand, go out on the stair landing, close the door after you, and stand there until you hear me call."

Mr. Hudspeth couldn't understand what all this meant, but he concluded to humor the joke. So he did as he was bid. He carried the candle from the room, closed the door, and stood on the landing until he heard Little Crotchet calling. When he reëntered the room he held the candle above his head and looked about him. He evidently expected to see the runaway.

"This is equal to joining a secret society," he said. "Where is your runaway? Has he escaped?"

"I just wanted to make the window dark a moment and then bright again. That is my signal. If he sees it, he'll come. Don't you think it's cunning?"

"I shall certainly think so if the runaway comes," replied Mr. Hudspeth somewhat doubtfully.

"He has never failed yet," said Little Crotchet. "If he fails now, it will be because Jim Simmons's hounds have caught him, or else he is too tired to come out on the hill and watch for the signal."

"Were the bloodhounds after him?" inquired Mr. Hudspeth, with a frown.

"Bloodhounds!" exclaimed Little Crotchet. "I never saw a bloodhound, and I never heard of one around here. If my runaway is caught, the dog that did it could be put in the pocket of that big overcoat you had strapped on your trunk."

The lad paused and held up his finger. His ear had caught the sound of Aaron's feet on the shingles. There was a faint grating sound, as the window sash was softly raised and lowered, and then the Son of Ben Ali stepped from behind the curtain. He stood still as a statue when his eye fell on the stranger, and his attitude was one of simple dignity when he turned to the Little Master. He saw the lad laughing and he smiled in sympathy.

"He's one of us," said Little Crotchet, "and I wanted him to see you. He's my teacher. Mr. Hudspeth, this is Aaron."

Mr. Hudspeth grasped Aaron's hand and shook it warmly, and they talked for some time, the Son of Ben Ali sitting on the side of Little Crotchet's bed, holding the lad's hand in one of his. Aaron told of his day's experiences, and his description of the affair in the Swamp was so vivid and realistic that Mr. Hudspeth exclaimed:—

"If that were put in print, the world would declare it to be pure fiction."

"Fiction," said Little Crotchet to Aaron, with an air of great solemnity, "fiction is a story put in a book. A story is sometimes called a fib, but when it is printed it is called fiction."

Mr. Hudspeth laughed and so did Aaron, but Aaron's laugh had a good deal of pride in it.

"He's crippled here," remarked Aaron, touching Little Crotchet's legs, "but not here,"—touching the boy's head.

"But all this is not what I called you for," said Little Crotchet after a while. "Timoleon tore his stable door down to-day and came near killing one of the hands. He is out now. Father will be angry when he comes home and hears about it. Can't you put him in his stable?"

"Me? I can lead the grandson of Abdallah all around the plantation by a yarn string," Aaron declared.

HE STOOD AS STILL AS A STATUE

"Well, if you had been here to-day you'd have found out different. You don't know that horse," Little Crotchet insisted.

"He is certainly as vicious a creature as I ever saw," remarked the Teacher, who had been an amazed witness of the horse's performances.

"I'll show you," Aaron declared.

"Oh, no!" protested Little Crotchet. "Don't try any tricks on that horse. He's too mean and cruel. If you can get him in his stable, and fasten him in, I'll be glad. But don't go near him; he'll bite your head off."

Aaron laughed and then he seemed to be considering something. "I wish"—He paused and looked at Little Crotchet.

"You wish what?" asked the lad.

"I wish you might go with me. But it is dark. The moon is a day moon. I could tote you to the fence."

"And then what?" asked Little Crotchet.

"You could see a tame horse—the grandson of Abdallah."

"I'll go to the fence if you'll carry me," said Little Crotchet. "The air is not cold—no wind is blowing."

"Shall I go too?" asked Mr. Hudspeth.

"I'd be glad," said Aaron.

So, although the night was not cold, Aaron took a shawl from the bed and wrapped it about Little Crotchet, lifted the lad in his arms, and went softly down the stairway, Mr. Hudspeth following. The night was not so dark after all. Once away from the light, various familiar objects began to materialize. The oaks ceased to be huge shadows. There was a thin, milk-white haze in the sky that seemed to shed a reflection of light on the earth below.

A negro passed along the beaten way leading to the cabins, whistling a tune. It was Randall. He heard the others and paused.

"It's your turn to tote," said Aaron.

"Who?" exclaimed Randall.

"The Little Master," replied Aaron.

Randall laughed. Who talked of turns where the Little Master was concerned? When it came to carrying that kind of burden, Randall was the man to do it, and it was "Don't le' me hurt you, honey. Ef I squeeze too tight, des say de word;" and then, "Whar we gwine, honey? A'on gwine in dar en put dat ar hoss up? Well, 'fo' he go in dar less all shake han's wid 'im, kaze when we nex' lay eyes on 'im he won't hear us, not ef we stoop down and holler good-by in his year."

But following Aaron, they went toward the lot where the Black Stallion had shown his savage temper during the day.

VIII.

THE HAPPENINGS OF A NIGHT.

When Aaron and those who were with him reached the lot fence, which had been made high and strong to keep old Jule, the jumping mule, within bounds, not a sound was heard on the other side.

"You er takin' yo' life in yo' han', mon," said Randall in a warning tone, as Aaron placed one foot on the third rail and vaulted over. The warning would have come too late in any event, for by the time the words were off Randall's tongue Aaron was over the fence. Those who were left behind waited in breathless suspense for some sound—some movement—from Timoleon, or some word from the Arab, to guide them. But for a little while (and it seemed to be a long, long while to Little Crotchet) nothing could be heard. Then suddenly there fell on their strained ears the noise that is made by a rushing horse, followed by a sharp exclamation from Aaron.

"What a pity if he is hurt!" exclaimed the Teacher.

Before anything else could be said, there came a whinnying sound from Timoleon, such as horses make when they greet those they are fond of, or when they are hungry and see some one bringing their food. But Timoleon's whinnying was more prolonged, and in the midst of it they could hear Aaron talking.

"Ef horses could talk," remarked Randall, "I'd up 'n' say dey wuz ca'n on a big confab in dar."

Little Crotchet said nothing. He had often heard Aaron say that he knew the language of animals, but the matter had never been pressed on the lad's attention as it was years afterwards on the attention of Buster John and Sweetest Susan.

Finally Aaron came to the fence, closely followed by the Black Stallion.

"Man, what you think?" said the Son of Ben Ali to Randall; "no water, no corn, no fodder since night before last."

"De Lord 'a' mercy!" exclaimed Randall. "Is anybody ever hear de beat er dat? No wonder he kotch dat ar nigger an' bit 'im! When de rascal git well I'm gwine ter ax Marster ter le' me take 'im out an' gi' 'im a paddlin'—an' I'll do it right, mon."

Mr. Hudspeth made a mental note of this speech, and resolved to find out if Randall meant what he said, or was merely joking.

"Man, give me the Little Master," said Aaron from the top of the fence, "and run and fetch two buckets of water from the spring."

"Dey's water in de lot dar," Randall explained.

"It is dirty," replied Aaron. "The grandson of Abdallah would die before he would drink it."

He leaned down and took Little Crotchet in his arms. The muzzle of Timoleon was so near that the lad could feel the hot breath from his nostrils. Involuntarily the Little Master shuddered and shrank closer to Aaron.

"He'll not hurt you," said Aaron. He made a queer sound with his lips, and the horse whinnied. "Now you may put your hand on him—so." The Arab took the Little Master's hand and placed it gently on the smooth, sensitive muzzle of the horse. The lad could feel the nervous working of Timoleon's strong upper lip. Then he stroked the horse's head and rubbed the velvety ears, and in less time than it takes to write it down he felt very much at home with the Black Stallion, and had no fear of him then or afterwards.

Randall soon returned with cool, fresh water from the spring. The Black Stallion drank all that was brought and wanted more, but Aaron said no. He had placed the Little Master on Randall's shoulder, and Timoleon, when he finished drinking, was taken to his stable and fed, and the broken door propped in such a manner that it could not be forced open from the inside. This done, Aaron returned to the others, relieved Randall of Little Crotchet, though the frail body was not much of a burden, and the three started back to the big house.

"You are still anxious to punish the poor man who was hurt by the horse?" asked the Teacher, as Randall bade them good-night.

"I is dat, suh. I'm des ez sho ter raise welks on his hide ez de sun is ter shine—leas'ways ef breff stay in his body. Ef I'd 'a' been dat ar hoss an' he'd done me dat away, I'd 'a' trompled de gizzard out 'n 'im. Ef dey's anything dat I do 'spise, suh, it's a low-down, triflin', good-fer-nothin' nigger."

Mr. Hudspeth knew enough about human nature to be able to catch the tone of downright sincerity in the negro's voice, and the fact not only amazed him at the time, but worried him no little when he recalled it afterward; for his memory seized upon it and made it more important than it really was. And he saw and noted other things on that plantation that puzzled him no little, and destroyed in his own mind the efficiency of some of his strongest anti-slavery arguments; but it did not, for it could not, reach the essence of the matter as he had conceived it, that human slavery, let it be national or sectional, or paternal and patriarchal, was an infliction on the master as well as an injustice to the negro.

So far so good. But Mr. Hudspeth could not see then what he saw and acknowledged when American slavery was happily a thing of the past, namely: That in the beginning, the slaves who

were brought here were redeemed from a slavery in their own country worse than the bondage of death; that though they came here as savages, they were brought in close and stimulating contact with Christian civilization, and so lifted up that in two centuries they were able to bear the promotion to citizenship which awaited them; and that, although this end was reached in the midst of confusion and doubt, tumult and bloodshed, it was given to human intelligence to perceive in slavery, as well as in the freedom of the slaves, the hand of an All-wise Providence, and to behold in their bondage here the scheme of a vast university in which they were prepared to enjoy the full benefits of all the blessings which have been conferred on them, and which, though they seem to have been long delayed, have come to them earlier than to any other branch of the human race.

The Teacher who played his little part in the adventures of Aaron played a large part in national affairs at a later day. He saw slavery pass away, and he lived long enough after that event to put on record this declaration: "Looking back on the history of the human race, let us hasten to acknowledge, while the acknowledgment may be worth making, that two hundred and odd years of slavery, as it existed in the American republic, is a small price to pay for participation in the inestimable blessings and benefits of American freedom and American citizenship." And as he spoke, the great audience he was addressing seemed to fade before his eyes, and he found himself wandering again on the old plantation with Little Crotchet, or walking under the starlit skies talking to Aaron. And he heard again the genial voice of the gentleman whose guest he was, and lived again through the pleasures and perils of that wonderful year on the Abercrombie place.

But all this was twenty-five years in the future, and Mr. Hudspeth had not even a dream of what that future was to bring forth. Indeed, as he followed Aaron and Little Crotchet from the horse lot to the house he was less interested in what the years might hold for him than he was in one incident that occurred while Aaron was preparing to take the Black Stallion back to his stall. He was puzzled and wanted information. How did Aaron know that the horse had gone without water and food? He observed that neither Little Crotchet nor Randall questioned the statement when it was made, but treated it as a declaration beyond dispute. And yet the runaway had been in the woods, and a part of the time was pursued by hounds. He had no means of knowing whether or not the Black Stallion had been attended to.

The matter weighed on the Teacher's mind to such an extent that when he and his companions were safe in Little Crotchet's room he put a question to Aaron.

"By what means did you know that the horse had been left without food and water?"

Aaron glanced at Little Crotchet and smiled. "Well, sir, to tell you would be not to tell you. You wouldn't believe me."

"Oh, you go too far,—indeed you do. Why should I doubt your word?"

"It don't fit in with things you know."

"Try me."

"The grandson of Abdallah told me," replied Aaron simply.

The Teacher looked from Aaron to Little Crotchet. "You must be joking," he remarked.

"Oh, no, he isn't," protested Little Crotchet. "I know he can talk with the animals. He has promised to teach me, but I always forget it when I go to the Swamp; there are so many other things to think about."

"Would you teach me?" Mr. Hudspeth asked. His face was solemn, and yet there was doubt in the tone of his voice.

Aaron shook his head. "Too old," he explained. "Too old, and know too much."

"It's another case of having a child's faith," suggested the Teacher.

"Most, but not quite," answered Aaron. "It is like this: The why must be very big, or you must be touched."

The Teacher pondered over this reply for some moments, and then said: "There must be some real reason why I should desire to learn the language of animals. Is that it?"

"Most, but not quite," Aaron responded. "You must have the sure-enough feeling."

"I see. But what is it to be touched? What does that mean?"

"You must be touched by the people who live next door to the world."

The Teacher shook his head slowly and stroked his beard thoughtfully. He tried to treat the whole matter with due solemnity, so as to keep his footing, and he succeeded.

"Where is this country that is next door to the world?" he asked, turning to Little Crotchet.

"Under the spring," the lad replied promptly.

"Have you ever visited that country?" the Teacher asked. His tone was serious enough now.

"No," replied Little Crotchet, with a wistful sigh. "I'm crippled, you know, and walk only on my crutches. It is far to go, and I can't take my pony. But Aaron has told me about it, and I have seen Little Mr. Thimblefinger—once—and he told me about Mrs. Meadows and the rest and brought me a message from old Mr. Rabbit. They all live in the country next door to the world."

For several minutes the Teacher sat and gazed into the pale flame of the candle. The wax or

tallow had run down on one side, and formed a figure in the semblance of a wee man hanging to the brass mouth of the candlestick with both hands. Glazing thus, queer thoughts came to the Teacher's mind. He tugged at his beard to see whether he was awake or dreaming. Could it be that by some noiseless shifting of the scenery he was even now in the country next door to the world? He rose suddenly, shook hands with Aaron, and, swayed by some sudden impulse, stooped and pressed his lips to the pale brow of the patient lad. Then he went to his room, threw open the window, and sat for an hour, wondering what influence his strange experiences would have on his life.

And his reflections were not amiss, for years afterwards his experiences of this night were responsible for his intimacy with the greatest American of our time,—Abraham Lincoln. It was in the early part of the war that Mr. Hudspeth, one of a group of congressmen in consultation with the President, let fall some chance remarks about the country next door to the world. Mr. Lincoln had been telling a humorous story, and was on the point of telling another, when Mr. Hudspeth's chance remark struck his ear.

"Whereabouts is that country?" he asked.

"Not far from Georgia," replied Mr. Hudspeth.

"Who lives there?"

"Little Crotchet, Aaron the Arab, Little Mr. Thimblefinger, Mrs. Meadows, and old Mr. Rabbit." Mr. Hudspeth counted them off on his fingers in a humorous manner.

Mr. Lincoln, who had been laughing before, suddenly grew serious—melancholy, indeed. He talked with the congressmen awhile longer, but they knew by his manner that they were dismissed. As they were leaving, the President remarked:—

"Wait till your hurry's over, Hudspeth; I want to talk to you."

And sitting before the fire in his private office, Mr. Lincoln recalled Mr. Hudspeth's chance remark, and questioned him with great particularity about Aaron and Little Crotchet and all the rest.

"Of course you believed in the country next door to the world?" Mr. Lincoln suggested.

"To tell you the truth, Mr. President, I felt queerly that night. It seemed as real to me as anything I ever heard of and never saw."

"Get the feeling back, Hudspeth; get it back. I can believe everything you told me about it."

And after that, when Mr. Hudspeth called on the President, and found him in a mood between extreme mirth and downright melancholy, he would say: "I was with Aaron last night," or "I'm just from the country next door to the world," or "I hope Sherman won't get lost in the country that is next door to the world."

But all this was in the future, and, as we all know, Mr. Hudspeth, sitting at his window and gazing at the stars that hung sparkling over the Abercrombie place, could not read the future. If it was too late for him to learn the language of the animals, how could he hope to interpret the prophecies of the constellations?

Aaron sat with Little Crotchet until there was no danger that the red goblin, Pain, would put in an appearance, and then he slipped through the window, and was soon at the foot of the oak, where Rambler was taking a nap. He gave the dog some of the food that Little Crotchet had put by for him, ate heartily himself, and then went toward the Swamp.

On the hill he turned and looked back in the direction of Little Crotchet's window. As he paused he heard a voice cry "Hello!" Aaron was not startled, for the sound came from a distance, and fell but faintly on his ears. He listened and heard it again:—

IT WAS THE WHITE-HAIRED MASTER

"Hello! Hello!"

It seemed to come from the road, half a mile away, and Aaron knew that there was no house in that direction for a traveler or a passer-by to hail. There was something in the tone that suggested distress.

Without waiting to listen again, the Arab started for the road in a rapid trot. He thought he heard it again as he ran, and this caused him to run the faster. He climbed the fence that marked the line of the road, and sat there a moment; but all was silence, save the soft clamor of insects and frogs that is a feature of the first half of the night.

Aaron had now come to a point from which he could reach the Swamp more conveniently by following the road for half a mile, though he would have another hill to climb. As he jumped from the fence into the road the cry came to his ears again, and this time with startling distinctness:

"Hello! Hello! Oh, isn't there some one to hear me?"

It was so plainly the call of some one in distress that Aaron shouted an answer of encouragement, and ran as fast as he could in the direction from which the sound came. The situation was so new to Rambler that, instead of making ahead to investigate and report, he stuck to Aaron, whining uneasily. As the Son of Ben Ali ran he saw dimly outlined at the foot of the hill a short distance beyond him a huge something that refused to take a recognizable shape until he stood beside it, and even then it was startling enough. It was the Gray Mare, Timoleon's sister, lying at full length by the side of the road, and underneath her the Son of Ben Ali knew he would find the White-Haired Master. But it was not as bad as it might have been.

"Hurt much, Master?" said Aaron, leaning over Mr. Abercrombie and touching him on the shoulder.

"Not seriously," replied the White-Haired Master. "But the leg that is under the mare is numb."

The Gray Mare, after falling, had done nothing more than whinny. If she had struggled to rise, the White-Haired Master's leg would have needed a doctor: and if she had risen to her feet and started home the doctor would have been unnecessary, for the imprisoned foot was caught in the stirrup.

Well for Mr. Abercrombie that Aaron knew the Gray Mare, and that the Gray Mare knew Aaron. She whinnied when the runaway spoke to her. She raised her head and gathered her forefeet under her, and then suddenly, at a word from Aaron, lifted her weight from the leg, while the foot was taken from the stirrup. Again the word was given and the Gray Mare rose easily to her feet and shook herself.

"Can you walk, Master?" Aaron asked.

"I think so—certainly."

Yet it was not an easy thing to do. Though the limb was not broken, owing to the fact that the ground was damp and soft where the Gray Mare fell, yet it had been imprisoned for some time, and it was both numb and bruised. The numbness was in evidence now, as the White-Haired Master rose to his feet and tried to walk; the bruises would speak for themselves to-morrow.

"What is your name?" Mr. Abercrombie asked.

"I am called Aaron, Master."

"I thought so, and I'm glad of it. Some day I'll thank you; but now—pins and needles!" The blood was beginning to circulate in the numb leg, and this was not by any means a pleasant experience. Aaron shortened it somewhat by rubbing the limb vigorously.

"Are you still in the woods, Aaron?"

"Yes, Master."

"Well, I'm sorry. I wish you belonged to me."

"I'm wishing harder than you, Master."

"What a pity—what a pity!"

"Don't get too sorry, Master."

"No; it would do no good."

"And don't blame the Gray Mare for stumbling, Master. The saddle too high on her shoulders, the belly-band too tight, and her shoes nailed on in the dark."

Aaron helped Mr. Abercrombie to mount. "Good-night, Master!"

"Good-night, Aaron!"

The Arab watched the Gray Mare and her rider until the darkness hid them from view. And no wonder! He was the only man, living or dead, that the Son of Ben Ali had ever called "Master." Why? Aaron tried to make the matter clear to his own mind, and while he was doing his best to unravel the problem he heard buggy wheels rattle on the hilltop. The horse must have shied at something just then, for a harsh voice cried out, followed by the sound of a whip falling cruelly on the creature's back. The wheels rattled louder as the creature leaped frantically from under the whip. The harsh voice cried "Whoa!" three times, twice in anger, and the third time in mortal fear. And then Aaron knew that he had another adventure on his hands.

IX.

THE UPSETTING OF MR. GOSSETT.

If Aaron had known it was Mr. Gossett's voice he heard and Mr. Gossett's hand that brought the buggy whip down on the poor horse's back with such cruel energy, the probability is that he would have taken to his heels; and yet it is impossible to say with certainty. The Son of Ben Ali was such a curious compound that his actions depended entirely on the mood he chanced to be in. He was full of courage, and yet was terribly afraid at times. He was dignified and proud, and yet no stranger to humility. His whole nature resented the idea of serving as a slave, yet he would have asked nothing better than to be Little Crotchet's slave: and he was glad to call Mr. Abercrombie master. So that, after all, it may be that he would have stood his ground, knowing that the voice and hand were Mr. Gossett's when his ears told him, as they now did, that the horse, made furious by the cruel stroke of the whip, was running away, coming down the hill at breakneck speed.

Mr. Gossett had been on a fruitless errand. When his son George reached home that morning and told him that Mr. Jim Simmons's dogs had followed the trail to the river and there lost it, Mr. Gossett remarked that he was glad he did not go on a fool's errand, and he made various statements about Mr. Simmons and his dogs that were not at all polite. Later in the day, however (though the hour was still early), when Mr. Gossett was making the customary round of his plantation, he fell in with a negro who had been hunting for some stray sheep. The negro, after giving an account of his movements, made this further remark:—

"I sholy 'spected you'd be over yander wid Mr. Jim Simmons, Marster. His dogs done struck a track leadin' inter de swamp, an' dey sho went a callyhootin'."

"When was that?" Mr. Gossett inquired.

"Not mo' dan two hours ago, ef dat," responded the negro. "I lis'n at um, I did, an' dey went right spang tor'ds de Swamp. I know'd de dogs, kaze I done hear um soon' dis mornin'."

Giving the negro some instructions that would keep him busy the rest of the day if he carried them out, Mr. Gossett turned his horse's head in the direction of the Swamp, and rode slowly thither. The blue falcon soared high in the air and paid no attention to Mr. Gossett. For various reasons that the Swamp knew about the Turkey Buzzard was not in sight. The Swamp itself was full of the reposeful silence that daylight usually brought to it. Mr. Gossett rode about and listened; but if all the dogs in the world had suddenly disappeared, the region round about could not have been freer of their barking and baying than it was at that moment.

All that Mr. Gossett could do was to turn about and ride back home. But he was very much puzzled. If Mr. Simmons had trailed a runaway into the Swamp and caught him, or if he had made two failures in one morning, Mr. Gossett would like very much to know it. In point of fact, he was such a practical business man that he felt it was Mr. Simmons's duty to make some sort of report to him. In matters of this kind Mr. Gossett was very precise.

But after dinner he felt in a more jocular mood. He informed his son George that he thought he would go over and worry Mr. Simmons a little over his failure to catch Aaron, and he had his horse put to the buggy, and rode six or seven miles to Mr. Simmons's home, smiling grimly as he went along.

Mr. Simmons was at home, but was not feeling very well, as his wife informed Mr. Gossett. Mrs. Simmons herself was in no very amiable mood, as Mr. Gossett very soon observed. But she asked him in politely enough, and said she'd go and tell Jimmy that company had come. She went to the garden gate not very far from the house and called out to her husband in a shrill voice:—

"Jimmy! Oh, Jimmy! That old buzzard of a Gossett is in the house. Come see what he wants. And do put on your coat before you come in the house. And wash your hands. They're dirtier than sin. And hit that shock of yours one lick with the comb and brush. Come right on now. If I have to sit in there and talk to the old rascal long I'll have a fit. Ain't you coming? I'll run back before he ransacks the whole house."

Mr. Simmons came sauntering in after a while, and his wife made that the excuse for disappearing, though she went no further than the other side of the door, where she listened with all her ears, being filled with a consuming curiosity to know what business brought Mr. Gossett to that house. She had not long to wait, for the visitor plunged into the subject at once.

"You may know I was anxious about you, Simmons, or I wouldn't be here." ("The old hypocrite!" remarked Mrs. Simmons, on the other side of the door.) "You didn't come by when your hunt ended, and I allowed maybe that you had caught the nigger and either killed or crippled him, and —ahem!—felt a sort of backwardness in telling me about it. So I thought I would come over and see you, if only to say that whether you caught the nigger or killed him, he's responsible for it and not you."

"No, Colonel, I'm not in the practice of killing niggers nor crippling 'em. I've caught a many of 'em, but I've never hurt one yet. But, Colonel! If you'd 'a' gone through with what I've been through this day, you'd 'a' done exactly what I done. You'd 'a' went right straight home without stopping to ask questions or to answer 'em—much less tell tales."

Thereupon Mr. Simmons told the story of his adventure in the Swamp, varnishing up the facts as

he thought he knew them, and adding some details calculated to make the episode much more interesting from his point of view. It will be remembered that Mr. Simmons was in total ignorance of what really happened in the Swamp. He had conceived the theory that his dogs had hit upon the trail of a wildcat going from the river to its den in the Swamp, and that, when the dogs had followed it there, they had been attacked, not by one wildcat, but by the whole "caboodle" of wildcats, to use Mr. Simmons's expression.

Having conceived this theory, Mr. Simmons not only stuck to it, but added various incidents that did credit to his imagination. For instance, he made this statement in reply to a question from Mr. Gossett:—

"What did I think when I heard all the racket and saw Sound come out mangled? Well, I'll tell you, Colonel, I didn't know what to think. I never heard such a terrible racket in all my born days. I says to myself, 'I'll just ride in and see what the trouble is, and if there ain't but one wildcat, why, I'll soon put an end to him.' So I spurred my hoss up, and started in; but before we went anyways, hardly, the hoss give a snort and tried to whirl around and run out.

"It made me mad at the time," Mr. Simmons went on, his inventive faculty rising to the emergency, "but, Colonel, it's a mighty good thing that hoss had more sense than I did, because if he hadn't I'd 'a' never been setting here telling you about it. I tried to make the hoss stand, but he wouldn't, and, just then, what should I see but two great big wildcats trying to sneak up on me? And all the time, Colonel, the racket in the Swamp was getting louder and louder. Pluto was in there somewheres, and I know'd he was attending to his business, so I just give the hoss the reins and he went like he was shot out of a gun.

"I pulled him in, and turned him around, and then I saw Pluto trying to come out. Now, Colonel, you may know if it was too hot for him it was lots too warm for me. Pluto tried to come, and he was a-fighting like fury; but it was no go. The two cats that had been sneaking up on me lit on him, and right then and there they tore him all to flinders! Colonel, they didn't leave a piece of that dog's hide big enough to make a woman's glove if it had been tanned. And as if that wouldn't do 'em, they made another sally and come at me, tush and claw. And I just clapped spurs to the hoss and cleaned up from there. Do you blame me, Colonel?"

THEY TORE HIM ALL TO FLINDERS

"As I understand it, Simmons," remarked Mr. Gossett, after pulling his beard and reflecting a while, "you didn't catch the nigger."

("The nasty old buzzard!" remarked Mrs. Simmons, on the other side of the door. "If I was Jimmy I'd hit him with a cheer.")

"Do you think you'd 'a' caught him, Colonel, taking into account all the circumstances and things?" inquired Mr. Simmons, with his irritating drawl.

"I didn't say I was going to catch him, did I?" replied Mr. Gossett. "I didn't say he couldn't get away from my dogs, did I?"

"Supposing you had," suggested Mr. Simmons, "would you 'a' done it? I ain't never heard of you walking in amongst a drove of wildcats to catch a nigger."

"And so you didn't catch him; and your fine dogs are finer now than they ever were?" Mr. Gossett remarked.

("My goodness! If Jimmy don't hit him, I'll go in and do it myself," said Mrs. Simmons, on the other side of the door.)

"Well, Colonel, it's just like I tell you." Mr. Simmons would have said something else, but just then the door opened and Mrs. Simmons walked in, fire in her eye.

"You've saved your $30, hain't you?" she said to Mr. Gossett.

"Why—er—yes'm—but"—

"No buts about it," she snapped. "If you ain't changed mightily, you think a heap more of $30 in your pocket than you do of a nigger in the bushes. Jimmy don't owe you nothin', does he?"

"Well—er—no'm." Mr. Gossett had been taken completely by surprise.

"No, he don't, and if he did I'd quit him right now—this very minute," Mrs. Simmons declared, gesticulating ominously with her forefinger. "And what Jimmy wants to go trolloping about the country trying to catch the niggers you drive to the woods is more'n I can tell to save my life. Why, if he was to catch your runaway niggers they wouldn't stay at home no longer than the minute you took the ropes off 'em."

Mr. Simmons cleared his throat, as if to say something, but his wife anticipated him.

"Oh, hush up, Jimmy!" she cried. "You know I'm telling nothing but the truth. There ain't a living soul in this country that don't know a Gossett nigger as far as they can see him."

"What are the ear-marks, ma'am?" inquired Mr. Gossett, trying hard to be jocular. In a moment he was heartily sorry he had asked the question.

"Ear-marks? Ear-marks? Hide-marks, you better say. Why, they've been abused and half fed till they are ashamed to look folks in the face, and I don't blame 'em. They go sneaking and shambling along and look meaner than sin. And 't ain't their own meanness that shows in 'em. No! Not by a long sight. I'll say that much for the poor creeturs."

There was something of a pause here, and Mr. Gossett promptly took advantage of it. He rose, bowed to Mrs. Simmons, who turned her back on him, and started for the door, saying:—

"Well, Simmons, I just called to see what luck you'd had this morning. My time's up. I must be going."

Mr. Simmons followed him to the door and out to the gate. Before Mr. Gossett got in his buggy he turned and looked toward the house, remarking to Mr. Simmons in a confidential tone:—

"I say, Simmons! She's a scorcher, ain't she?"

"A right warm one, Colonel, if I do say it myself," replied Mr. Simmons, with a touch of pride. "But, Colonel, before you get clean away, let's have a kind of understanding about this matter."

"About what matter?" Mr. Gossett stood with one foot on his buggy step, ready to get in.

"About this talk of Jenny's," said Mr. Simmons, nodding his head toward the house. "I'll go this far—I'll say that I'm mighty sorry it wasn't somebody else that done the talkin', and in somebody else's house. But sence it was Jenny, it can't be holp. If what she said makes you feel tired—sort of weary like—when you begin to think about it, jest bear in mind, Colonel, that I hold myself both personally and individually responsible for everything Jenny has said to-day, and everything she may say hereafter."

Mr. Gossett lowered his eyebrows and looked through them at Mr. Simmons.

"Why, of course, Simmons," he said a little stiffly, "we all have to stand by the women folks. I understand that. But blamed if I'd like to be in your shoes."

"Well, Colonel, they fit me like a glove."

Mr. Gossett seated himself in his buggy and drove away. Mrs. Simmons was standing in the door, her arms akimbo, when her husband returned to the house.

"Jimmy, you didn't go and apologize to that old buzzard for what I said, did you?"

Mr. Simmons laughed heartily at the idea, and when he repeated what he had said to Mr. Gossett his wife jumped at him, and kissed him, and then ran into the next room and cried a little. It's the one way that all women have of "cooling down," as Mr. Simmons would have expressed it.

But it need not be supposed that Mr. Gossett was in a good humor. He felt that Mrs. Simmons, in

speaking as she did, was merely the mouthpiece of public opinion, and the idea galled him. He called on a neighbor, on his way back home, to discuss a business matter; and he was in such a bad humor, so entirely out of sorts, as he described it, that the neighbor hastened to get a jug of dram out of the cupboard, and, soothed and stimulated by the contents of the jug, Mr. Gossett thawed out. By degrees his good humor, such as it was, returned, and by degrees he took more of the dram than was good for him. So that when he started home, which was not until after sundown, his toddies had begun to tell on him. His eyes informed him that his horse had two heads, and he realized that he was not in a condition to present himself at home, where his son George could see him. The example would be too much for George, who had already on various occasions shown a fondness for the bottle.

What, then, was to be done? A very brilliant idea struck Mr. Gossett. He would not drive straight home; that would never do in the world. He'd go up the road that led to town until he came to Wesley Chapel, and there he'd take the other road that led by the Aikin plantation. This was a drive of about ten miles, and by that time the effects of the dram would be worn off.

Mr. Gossett carried out this programme faithfully, and that was why the buggy was coming over the hill as Aaron was going along the road on his way to the Swamp.

Contrary to Mr. Gossett's expectations the dram did not exhaust itself. He still felt its influences, but he was no longer good-humored. Instead, he was nervous and irritable. He began to brood over the unexpected tongue-lashing that Mrs. Simmons had given him, and succeeded in working himself into a very ugly frame of mind.

When his horse came to the top of the hill, something the animal saw—a stray pig, or maybe a cow lying in the fence corner—caused it to swerve to one side. This was entirely too much for Mr. Gossett's unstrung nerves. He seized the whip and brought it down upon the animal's back with all his might. Maddened by the sudden and undeserved blow, the horse made a terrific lunge forward, causing Mr. Gossett to drop the reins and nearly throwing him from the buggy. Finding itself free, the excited horse plunged along the road. The grade of the hill was so heavy that the animal could not run at top speed, but made long jumps, flirting the buggy about as though it had been made of cork.

The swinging and lurching of the buggy added to the animal's excitement, and the climax of its terror was reached when Aaron loomed up in the dark before it. The horse made one wild swerve to the side of the road, but failed to elude Aaron. The sudden swerve, however, threw Mr. Gossett out. He fell on the soft earth, and lay there limp, stunned, and frightened. Aaron, holding to the horse, ran by its side a little way, and soon had the animal under control. He soothed it a moment, talked to it until it whinnied, fastened the lines to a fence corner, and then went back to see about the man who had fallen from the buggy, little dreaming that it was his owner, Mr. Gossett. But just as he leaned over the man, Rambler told him the news; the keen nose of the dog had discovered it, though he stood some distance away.

This caused Aaron to straighten himself again, and as he did so he saw something gleam in the starlight. It was Mr. Gossett's pistol, which had fallen from his pocket as he fell. Aaron picked up the weapon, handling it very gingerly, for he was unused to firearms, and placed it under the buggy seat. Then he returned with an easier mind and gave his attention to Mr. Gossett.

THE EXCITED HORSE PLUNGED ALONG

"Hurt much?" he asked curtly, shaking the prostrate man by the shoulder.

"More scared than hurt, I reckon," replied Mr. Gossett. "What was that dog barking at just now?"

"He ain't used to seeing white folks in the dirt," Aaron explained.

"Who are you?" Mr. Gossett inquired.

"One," answered Aaron.

"Well, if I'd seen you a half hour ago I'd 'a' sworn you were Two." Mr. Gossett made this joke at his own expense, but Aaron did not understand it, and therefore could not appreciate it. So he said nothing.

"Put your hand under my shoulder here, and help me to sit up. I want to see if any bones are broken."

Aided by Aaron Mr. Gossett assumed a sitting posture. While he was feeling of himself, searching for wounds and broken bones, he heard his horse snort. This reminded him (for he was still somewhat dazed) that he had started out with a horse and buggy.

"That's your horse, I reckon. Mine's at home by this time with two buggy shafts swinging to him. Lord! what a fool a man can be!"

"That's your horse," said Aaron.

"Mine? Who stopped him?"

"Me," Aaron answered.

"You? Why, as near as I can remember, he was coming down this hill like the dogs were after him. Who are you, anyhow?"

"One."

"Well, you are worth a dozen common men. Give me your hand."

Mr. Gossett slowly raised himself to his feet, shook first one leg and then the other, and appeared to be much relieved to find that his body and all of its members were intact. He walked about a little, and then went close to Aaron and peered in his face.

"Blamed if I don't believe you are my runaway nigger!" Mr. Gossett exclaimed.

"I smell whiskey," said Aaron.

"Confound the stuff! I never will get rid of it."

Mr. Gossett put his hands in his pocket and walked around again.

"Your name is Aaron," he suggested. Receiving no reply, he said: "If your name is Aaron you belong to me; if you belong to me get in the buggy and let's go home. You've been in the woods long enough."

"Too long," replied Aaron.

"That's a fact," Mr. Gossett assented. "Come on and go home with me. If you're afeard of me you can put that idea out of your mind. I swear you shan't be hit a lick. You are the only nigger I ever had any respect for, and I'll be blamed if I know how I came to have any for you after the way you've treated me. But if you'll promise not to run off any more I'll treat you right. You're a good hand and a good man."

Mr. Gossett paused and felt in his pockets, evidently searching for something. "Have you seen a pistol lying loose anywhere around here?" he asked.

"It's all safe," replied Aaron.

"You've got it. Very well. I was just going to pull it out and hand it to you. Come on; it's getting late." Seeing that Aaron made no movement, Mr. Gossett tried another scheme. "Well, if you won't go home," he said, "and I think I can promise that you'll be sorry if you don't, get in the buggy and drive part of the way for me. I'm afraid of that horse after his caper to-night."

"Well, I'll do that," remarked Aaron.

He helped Mr. Gossett into the buggy, untied the lines, took his seat by his owner, and the two were soon on their way home.

X.

CHUNKY RILEY SEES A QUEER SIGHT.

There is no doubt that Mr. Gossett was sincere in what he said to Aaron. There is no doubt that he fully intended to carry out the promises he had made in the hope of inducing the runaway to return home with him. Nor can it be doubted that he had some sort of respect for a slave who, although a fugitive with a reward offered for his capture, was willing to go to the rescue of his owner at a very critical moment. Mr. Gossett was indeed a harsh, hard, calculating man, whose whole mind was bent on accumulating "prop'ty," as he called it, to the end that he might be looked up to as Addison Abercrombie and other planters were. But after all, he was a human being, and he admired strength, courage, audacity, and the suggestion of craftiness that he thought he discovered in Aaron.

Moreover, he was not without a lurking fear of the runaway, for, at bottom, Mr. Gossett's was essentially a weak nature. This weakness constantly displayed itself in his hectoring, blustering, overbearing manner toward those over whom he had any authority. It was natural, therefore, that Mr. Gossett should have a secret dread of Aaron, as well as a lively desire to conciliate him up to a certain point. More than this, Mr. Gossett had been impressed by the neighborhood talk about the queer runaway. As long as such talk was confined to the negroes he paid no attention to it; but when such a sage as Mr. Jonathan Gadsby, a man of large experience and likewise a justice of the peace, was ready to agree to some of the most marvelous tales told about the agencies that Aaron was able to call to his aid, the superstitious fears of Mr. Gossett began to give him an uneasy feeling.

The first proposition that Mr. Gadsby laid down was that Aaron was "not by no means a nigger, as anybody with eyes in their head could see." That fact was first to be considered. Admit it, and everything else that was said would follow as a matter of course. Mr. Gadsby's argument, judicially delivered to whomsoever wanted to hear it, was this: It was plain to be seen that the runaway was no more like a nigger than a donkey is like a race-horse. Now, if he wasn't a nigger what was he trying to play nigger for? What was he up to? Why couldn't the track dogs catch him? When some one said Mr. Simmons's dogs hadn't tried, Mr. Gadsby would answer that when Mr. Simmons's dogs did try they'd make a worse muddle of it than ever. Why? Because the runaway had on him the marks of the men that called the elements to help them. Mr. Gadsby knew it, because he had seen their pictures in the books, and the runaway looked just like them. Mr. Gadsby's memory was exact. The pictures he had seen were in a book called the "Arabian Nights."

Mr. Gossett thought of what Mr. Gadsby had said, as he sat with Aaron in the buggy, and cold chills began to creep up his spine. He edged away as far as he could, but Aaron paid no attention to his movement. Once the horse turned its head sidewise and whinnied. Aaron made some sort of reply that was unintelligible to Mr. Gossett. The horse stopped still, Aaron jumped from the buggy, went to the animal's head, and presently came back with a part of the harness in his hand, which he threw on the bottom of the buggy.

"What's that?" Mr. Gossett asked.

"Bridle. Bit hurt horse's mouth." He then coolly pulled the reins in and placed them with the bridle.

"Why, confound it, don't you know this horse is as wild as a buck? Are you fixing to have me killed? What are you doing now?"

Aaron had taken the whip from its thimble, laid the lash gently on the horse's back, and held it there. In response to his chirrup the horse whinnied gratefully and shook its head playfully.

When Mr. Gossett saw that the horse was going easily and that it seemed to be completely under Aaron's control, he remembered again what Mr. Gadsby had said about people who were able to call the elements to their aid, and it caused a big lump to rise in his throat. What was this going on right before his eyes? A runaway sitting by his side and driving a fractious and easily frightened horse without bit or bridle? And then another thought crossed Mr. Gossett's mind—a thought so direful that it caused a cold sweat to stand on his forehead. Was it the runaway's intention to jump suddenly from the buggy and strike the horse with the whip? But Aaron showed no such purpose or desire. Once he leaned forward, peering into the darkness, and said something to the horse.

HE EDGED AWAY AS FAR AS HE COULD

"What is it?" Mr. Gossett asked nervously.

"Some buggies coming along," replied Aaron.

"Can you pass them here?"

"If they give your wheels one inch to spare," replied Aaron. "Tell 'em to bear to the right."

"Hello, there!" cried Mr. Gossett.

"Hello, yourself!" answered a voice.

"That you, Terrell?"

"Yes, ain't that Gossett?"

"The same. Bear to the right. Where've you been?"

"Been to the lodge at Harmony." The attic of the schoolhouse at Harmony was used as a Masonic lodge.

"Who's behind you?" Mr. Gossett inquired.

"Denham, Aiken, Griffin, and Gatewood."

There were, in fact, four buggies, Mr. Griffin being on horseback, and they were all close together. Mr. Gossett had but to seize Aaron, yell for help, and his neighbors would soon have the runaway tied hard and fast with the reins in the bottom of the buggy. That is, if Aaron couldn't call the elements to his aid—but suppose he could? What then? These thoughts passed through Mr. Gossett's mind, and he was strongly tempted to try the experiment; but he refrained. He said good-night, but Mr. Aiken hailed him.

"You know that new school teacher at Abercrombie's?"

"I haven't seen him," said Mr. Gossett.

"Well, he's there. Keep an eye on him. He's a rank abolitionist."

"Is that so?" exclaimed Mr. Gossett in a tone of amazement.

"So I've heard. He'll bear watching."

"Well, well, well!" Mr. Gossett ejaculated.

"What's that?" Aaron asked in a low tone, as they passed the last of the four buggies.

"What's what?"

"Abolitioner."

"Oh, that's one of these blamed new-fangled parties. You wouldn't know if I were to tell you."

In a little while they began to draw near Mr. Gossett's home, and he renewed his efforts to prevail on Aaron to go to the cabin that had been assigned to him, and to remain as one of the hands. Finally as they came within hailing distance of the house, Mr. Gossett said:—

"If you've made up your mind to stay, you may take the horse and put it up. If you won't stay, don't let the other niggers see you. Stop the horse if you can."

Aaron pressed the whip on the horse's flank, and instantly the buggy came to a standstill. The runaway jumped from the buggy, placed the whip in its thimble, and stood a moment as if reflecting. Then he raised his right arm in the air—a gesture that Mr. Gossett could not see, however—and said good-night.

"Wait!" exclaimed Mr. Gossett. "Where's my pistol?"

"Inside the buggy seat," replied Aaron, and disappeared in the darkness.

Mr. Gossett called a negro to take the horse, and it seemed as if one sprang from the ground to answer the call, with "Yes, Marster!" on the end of his tongue. It was Chunky Riley.

"How long have you been standing here?" asked Mr. Gossett suspiciously.

"No time, Marster. Des come a-runnin' when I hear de buggy wheels scrunchin' on de gravel. I hear you talkin' to de hoss whiles I comin' froo de big gate down yander by de barn."

"You're a mighty swift runner, then," remarked Mr. Gossett doubtfully.

"Yasser, I'm a right peart nigger. I'm short, but soon." Thereupon Chunky Riley pretended to laugh. Then he made a discovery, and became very serious. "Marster, dey ain't no sign er no bridle on dish yer hoss. An' whar de lines? Is anybody ever see de beat er dat? Marster, how in de name er goodness kin you drive dish yer hoss widout bridle er lines?"

"It's easy enough when you know how," replied Mr. Gossett complacently. He was flattered and soothed by the idea that Chunky Riley would believe him to be a greater man than ever. "Give the horse a good feed," commanded Mr. Gossett. "He has traveled far to-night, and he and I have seen some queer sights."

"Well, suh!" exclaimed Chunky Riley, with well-affected amazement. He caught the horse by the forelock and led it carefully through the gate into the lot, thence to the buggy-shelter, where he proceeded to take off the harness.

He shook his head and muttered to himself all the while, for he was wrestling with the most mysterious problem that had ever been presented to his mind. He had seen Aaron in the buggy with his master; he had heard his master begging Aaron not to stay in the woods; he had seen

and heard these things with his own eyes and ears, and they were too mysterious for his simple mind to explain. Didn't Aaron belong to Chunky Riley's master? Wasn't he a runaway? Didn't his master try to catch him? Didn't he have the Simmons nigger-dogs after him that very day? Well, then, why didn't his master keep Aaron while he had him in the buggy? Why did he sit still and allow the runaway to go back to the woods?

This was much more mysterious to Chunky Riley than anything he had ever heard of. He could make neither head nor tail of it. He knew that Aaron had some mysterious influence over the animals, both wild and tame. That could be accounted for on grounds that were entirely plausible and satisfactory to the suggestions of Chunky Riley's superstition. But did Aaron have the same power over his own master? It certainly seemed so, for he rode in the buggy with him, and went off into the woods again right before Mr. Gossett's eyes.

But wait a minute! If Aaron really had any influence over his own master, why didn't he stay at home instead of going into the woods? This was a problem too complicated for Chunky Riley to work out. But it worried him so that he whispered it among the other negroes on the place, and so it spread through all that region.

A fortnight afterwards it was nothing uncommon for negroes to come at night from plantations miles away so that they might hear from Chunky Riley's own lips what he had seen.

The tale that Chunky Riley told was beyond belief, but it was all the more impressive on that account. And it was very fortunate for Aaron, too, in one respect. After the story that Chunky Riley told became bruited about, there was not a negro to be found who could be bribed or frightened into spying on Aaron's movements, or who could be induced to say that he had seen him.

It was observed, too, by all the negroes, as well as by many of the white people, that Mr. Gossett seemed to lose interest in his fugitive slave. He made no more efforts to capture Aaron, and, when twitted about it by some of his near neighbors, his invariable remark was, "Oh, the nigger'll come home soon enough when cold weather sets in. A nigger can stand everything except cold weather." Yet Mr. Gossett's neighbors all knew that nothing was easier than for a runaway to make a fire in the woods and keep himself fairly comfortable. They wondered, therefore, why the well-known energy of Mr. Gossett in capturing his runaway negroes—and he had a remarkable experience in the matter of runaways—should suddenly cool down with respect to Aaron.

But it must not be supposed that this made any real difference. On the contrary, as soon as George Gossett found that his father was willing to allow matters to take their course as far as Aaron was concerned, he took upon himself the task of capturing the fugitive, and in this business he was able to enlist the interest of the young men of the neighborhood, who, without asking anybody's advice, constituted themselves the patrol. George Gossett's explanation to his companions, in engaging their assistance, was, "Pap is getting old, and he ain't got time to be setting up late at night and galloping about all day trying to catch a runaway nigger."

These young fellows were quite willing to pledge themselves to George Gossett's plans. They had arrived at the age when the vigor of youth seeks an outlet, and it was merely in the nature of a frolic for them to ride half the night patrolling, and sit out the other half watching for Aaron.

But there was one peculiarity about the vigils that were kept on account of Aaron. They were carried on, for the most part, within tasting distance of the stillhouse run by Mr. Fullalove, which was on a small watercourse not far from the Abercrombie place. Mr. Fullalove was employed simply to superintend the distilling of peach and apple brandy and corn whiskey; and although it was his duty to taste of the low wines as they trickled from the spout of the "worm," he could truthfully boast, as he frequently did, that not a drop of liquor had gone down his throat for "forty year." Being a temperance man, and feeling himself responsible for the "stuff" at the still, he was inclined to resent the freedom with which the young men conducted themselves. Sometimes they paid for what they drank, but more often they didn't, and at such times Mr. Fullalove would limp about attending to his business (he had what he called a "game leg") with tight-shut lips, refusing to respond to the most civil question.

But usually the young men were very good company, and, occasionally, when Mr. Fullalove was suffering from pains in his "game leg," they would keep up his fires for him. And that was no light task, for the still was of large capacity. Take it all in all, however, one night with another, Mr. Fullalove was perfectly willing to dispense with both the services and the presence of the roystering young men.

But one night when they came the old man had something interesting to tell them.

"You fellers ought to 'a' been here awhile ago," he said. "I reckon you'd 'a' seed somethin' that'd 'a' made you open your eyes. I was settin' in my cheer over thar, some'rs betwixt a nod an' a dream, when it seems like I heard a dog a-whinin' in the bushes. Then I heard a stick crack, an' when I opened my eyes who should I see but the biggest, strappin'est buck nigger that ever trod shoe leather. I say 'Nigger,'" Mr. Fullalove explained, "bekaze I dunner what else to say, but ef that man's a nigger I'm mighty much mistaken. He's dark enough for to be a nigger, but he ain't got the right color, an' he ain't got the right countenance, an' he ain't got the right kind of ha'r, an' he ain't got the right king of twang to his tongue."

Mr. Fullalove paused a moment to see what effect this would have on the young men. Then he went on:—

"I heard a dog whinin' out thar in the bushes, but I didn't pay no attention to it. Then I stoops down for to git a splinter for to light my pipe, an' when I look up thar was this big, tall—well, you

can call him 'nigger' ef you want to. I come mighty nigh jumpin' out'n my skin. I drapt splinter, pipe, hat, an' eve'ything else you can think of, an' ef the man hadn't 'a' retched down an' picked 'em up I dunno as I'd 'a' found 'em by now. I ain't had sech a turn,—well, not sence that night when the 'worm' got chugged up an' the cap of the still blow'd off.

"'Hello,' says I, 'when did you git in? You might 'a' knocked at the door,' says I. I tried for to make out I wern't skeer'd, but 't wa'n't no go. The man—nigger or ha'nt, whichsomever it might 'a' been—know'd e'en about as well as I did that he 'd skeered me. Says he, 'Will you please, sir, give me as much as a spoonful of low-wines for to rub on my legs?' says he. 'I've been on my feet so long that my limbs are sore,' says he.

"'Why, tooby shore I will,' says I, 'ef you'll make affydavy that you'll not creep up on me an' skeer me out'n two years' growth,' says I. You may not believe me," Mr. Fullalove continued solemnly, "but that man stood up thar an' never cracked a smile. I got one of them half-pint ticklers an' let the low-wines run in it hot from the worm. He taken it an' set right on that log thar an' poured it in his han' an' rubbed it on his legs. Now, ef that'd 'a' been one of you boys, you'd 'a' swaller'd the low-wines an' rubbed your legs wi' the bottle."

George Gossett knew that the man Mr. Fullalove had seen was no other than Aaron, the runaway.

"Which way did he go, Uncle Jake?" George inquired.

"Make inquirements of the wind, child! The wind knows lot more about it than me. The man bowed, raised his right han' in the a'r, taken a couple of steps, an'—*fwiff*—he was gone! Whether he floated or flew, I'll never tell you, but he done uther one er t' other, maybe both."

"I'd give a twenty-dollar bill if I could have been here!" exclaimed George Gossett.

"On what bank, Gossett?" asked one of his companions.

"On a sandbank," remarked Mr. Fullalove sarcastically.

"And I'll give a five-dollar bill to know which way he went," said young Gossett, paying no attention to gibe or sarcasm.

"Plank down your money!" exclaimed Mr. Fullalove.

The young man pulled a bill from his pocket, unrolled it, and held it in his hand.

"He went the way the wind blow'd! Gi' me the money," said Mr. Fullalove solemnly.

Whereat the young men laughed loudly, but not louder than Mr. Fullalove.

"Some of your low-wines must have slipped down your goozle," remarked George Gossett somewhat resentfully.

Later, when the young men were patrolling the plantations in a vain search for Aaron, their leader remarked:—

"The nigger that old Fullalove saw was pap's runaway."

"But," said one, "the old man says he wasn't a nigger."

"Shucks! Fallalove's so old he couldn't tell a mulatto from a white man at night. You needn't tell me; that nigger hangs around the Abercrombie place, and if we'll hang around there we'll catch him."

So they agreed then and there to lay siege, at it were, to the Abercrombie place every night, until they succeeded either in capturing Aaron or in finding out something definite about his movements. This siege was to go on in all sorts of weather and under all sorts of conditions.

XI.

THE PROBLEM THAT TIMOLEON PRESENTED.

When Mr. Abercrombie heard of the capers of the Black Stallion, he determined to place the horse in quarters that were more secure. But where? There was but one building on the place that could be regarded as perfectly secure—the crib in the five-acre lot. This crib was built of logs hewn square and mortised together at the ends. It had been built to hold corn and other grain, and logs were used instead of planks because the nearest sawmill was some distance away, and the logs were cheaper and handier. Moreover, as they were hewn from the hearts of the pines they would last longer than sawn lumber.

This building was therefore selected as the Black Stallion's stable, and it was made ready. A trough was fitted up and the edges trimmed with hoop iron to prevent the horse from gnawing it to pieces. The floor was taken away and a new door made, a thick, heavy affair. To guard against all accidents a hole, which could be opened or closed from the outside, was cut through the logs over the trough, so that when the Black Stallion was in one of his tantrums he could be fed and watered without risk to life or limb.

When everything was ready, the question arose, how was the horse to be removed to his new quarters? Mr. Abercrombie considered the matter an entire afternoon, and then decided to postpone it until the next day. He said something about it at supper, and this caused Mrs. Abercrombie to remark that she hoped he would get rid of such a savage creature. She said she should never feel safe while the horse remained on the place. But Mr. Abercrombie laughed at this excess of fear, and so did Little Crotchet, who made bold to say that if his father would permit him, he would have Timoleon put in his stable that very night, and it would be done so quietly that nobody on the place would know how or when it happened.

Mr. Abercrombie regarded his son with tender and smiling eyes.

"And what wonderful person will do this for you, my boy?"

"A friend of mine," replied Little Crotchet seriously.

"Well, you have so many friends that I'll never guess the name," remarked his father.

"Oh, but this is one of the most particular, particularest of my friends," the lad explained.

"I suppose you know he is getting up a great reputation among the servants," said Mrs. Abercrombie to her husband, half in jest and half in earnest.

"I know they are all very fond of him, my dear."

"Of course they are—how can they help themselves?" the lad's mother cried. "But this is 'a most particular, particularest' reputation." She quizzically quoted Little Crotchet's phrase, and he laughed when he heard it fall from her lips. "It is something quite wonderful. Since the time that he issued orders for no one to bother him after nine o'clock at night, the servants say that he talks with 'ha'nts.' They say he has become so familiar with bogies and such things that he can be heard talking with them at all hours of the night."

"Your mother has been counting the candles on you, my boy" remarked Mr. Abercrombie jokingly.

"Why, father! how can you put such an idea in the child's mind?" protested Mrs. Abercrombie.

"He's only teasing you, mama," said Little Crotchet.

"I heard him talking to a bogie the other night," remarked Mr. Hudspeth, the Teacher.

"Oh, I don't think you're a bogie," cried Little Crotchet. "You would have been one, though, if you had kept me in those awful books."

The Teacher had mischievously thrown out this hint about Aaron to see what effect it would have. He was amazed at the lad's self-possession, and at the deft manner in which he had turned the hint aside.

"Oh, have you been admitted to the sanctum?" inquired the lad's mother, laughing.

"I paused at the door to say good-night and remained until I learned a lesson I never shall forget," said Mr. Hudspeth.

"Ah, you're finding our boy out, eh?" exclaimed Mr. Abercrombie with a show of pride.

"He possesses already the highest culture the mind of man is capable of," Mr. Hudspeth declared. His tone was so solemn and his manner so earnest that Little Crotchet blushed. "He is cultured in the humanities. That is apart from scholarship," the Teacher explained, "but without it all knowledge is cold and dark and unfruitful."

"I know he is very humane," suggested Mr. Abercrombie.

"Oh, it is more than that," said Mr. Hudspeth; "far more than that. All sensitive people are tender-hearted. One may read a book and yet not catch the message it conveys. But this lad"—He paused and suddenly changed the subject. "He said he could have Timoleon carried to the new stable, and you are inclined to be doubtful. But he can do more than that: he can have the horse removed without bridle or halter."

"Then you know our boy better than we do!" Mrs. Abercrombie's tone was almost reproachful.

"I found him out quite by accident," replied Mr. Hudspeth.

Little Crotchet in his quaint way called attention to the fact that he was blushing again. "You've made me blush twice," he said, "and I can't stay after that."

At a sign, Jemimy, the house girl, who was waiting on the table—the same Jemimy who afterward had a daughter named Drusilla—turned the lad's chair about. He balanced himself on his crutches, and without touching his feet to the floor walked across the room to the hall, and so up the stairway. On the landing he paused.

"Shall I have Timoleon put in the new stable to-night?" he asked.

"By all means, my boy—if you can," answered Mr. Abercrombie. "If you succeed I'll give you a handsome present."

Little Crotchet always paused on the stair landing to say something, but never to say good-night. After a while his mother would go up and sit with him a few minutes, by way of kissing him good-night, and, later, his father would make the same little journey for the same purpose.

On this particular night, those whom Little Crotchet had left at the table remained conversing longer than usual. Mr. Hudspeth had something more to say about humanity-culture; and although he employed "the Concord dialect," as Mr. Abercrombie called it, his discourse was both interesting and stimulating. In the midst of it Jemimy dropped a plate and broke it. The crash of the piece of china put a temporary end to the conversation, and the silence that ensued had its humorous side. Jemimy's eyes, big as saucers and as white, were turned toward a door that led to the sitting-room. The door softly opened, and a portly negro woman, with a bunch of keys hanging at her waist, came into the dining-room. This was Mammy Lucy, the housekeeper. She never once glanced toward her master and mistress.

"White er blue?" she inquired in a low voice.

"Blue," replied Jemimy.

"Dat counts fer two," Mammy Lucy remarked. "You've done broke five. One mo', en you'll go whar you b'long. I done say mo' dan once you ain't got no business in dis house. De fiel' 's whar you b'long at."

Jemimy couldn't help that. She couldn't help anything. She knew how the Little Master would have the Black Stallion moved from one stable to the other. She knew, and she never would tell. They might send her to the field, they might drown her or strangle her, they might cut off her ears or gouge her eyes out, they might send her to town to the calaboose, they might do anything they pleased, but she never would tell. Not while her name was Jemimy, and she'd be named that until after she was put under the ground and covered up; and even then she wouldn't tell.

Later when Mr. Abercrombie went upstairs to say good-night to Little Crotchet, the lad asked if he might have Timoleon trained. He had heard his father talking of getting a trainer from Mobile, and so he made the suggestion that, instead of going to that expense, it might be well to have the horse trained by his "friend," as he called Aaron.

Mr. Abercrombie guessed who Little Crotchet's friend was, but, to please the lad, feigned ignorance. He told his son that the training of such a horse as Timoleon was a very delicate piece of business, and should be undertaken by no one but an expert. Now, if Little Crotchet's "friend" was an expert, which was not likely, well and good; if not, he might ruin a good horse. Still, if Little Crotchet was sure that everything would be all right, why, there would be no objection. At any rate, the horse was now old enough to be broken to the saddle, and Little Crotchet's "friend" could do that if no more.

So it was settled, and the lad was very happy. He made his signal for Aaron early and often, but, somehow, the Son of Ben Ali was long in coming that night. The reason was plain enough when he did come, but Little Crotchet was very impatient. The moon was shining, and as George Gossett and his companions had refused to raise the siege a single night since Mr. Fullalove had seen the runaway at the stillhouse, Aaron found it difficult to respond promptly when the Little Master signaled him to come. It is not an easy matter to pass a picket line of patrollers when the moon is shining as it shines in Georgia at the beginning of autumn, and as it shone on the Abercrombie place the night that Little Crotchet was so anxious to see Aaron.

Rambler was very busy that night trying to find a place where Aaron might pass the patrollers without attracting attention, but he had to give it up for a time. At last, however, three of them, George Gossett among the number, concluded to pay another visit to Mr. Fullalove, and this left the way clear. Aaron was prompt to take advantage of it. Going half bent, he kept in the shadow of the fence, slipped through the small jungle of black-jacks, ran swiftly across an open space to the negro cabins, flitted to the garden fence, and in the shadow of that fled to the front yard, and so up the friendly oak.

Oh, but Little Crotchet was impatient! He was almost ready to frown when Aaron made his appearance; but when the runaway told him of the big moon and the patrollers, he grew uneasy; and after telling Aaron about the Black Stallion, how the horse must be removed to the new stable, and how he must be broken to saddle and bridle, Little Crotchet declared that he was sorry he had signaled to Aaron.

"They'll catch you to-night, sure," he said.

But Aaron shook his head. "No, Little Master, not to-night. Not while I'm with the grandson of

Abdallah."

"Oh, I see!" laughed Little Crotchet; "you'll stay in his stable. Good! I'll bring you your breakfast in the morning."

Aaron smiled, shaking his head and looking at the basket of victuals that Little Crotchet always had ready for him when he came.

"No, Little Master! This will do. I'll not take the basket to-night. I'll put the victuals in my wallet." This was a bag suspended from his shoulder by a strap, being made after the manner of the satchels in which the children used to carry their books to school.

Aaron had another idea in his head, but he gave no hint of it to little Crotchet, for he didn't know how it would succeed. So he sat by the lad's bedside and drove away the red goblin, Pain, and waited until George Gossett and his companions had time to make another visit to the stillhouse. Then he took the big key of the new stable from the mantel, slipped it on his belt,—a leathern thong that he always wore around his body,—placed in his wallet the substantial lunch that the Little Master had saved for him, and prepared to take his leave. This time he did not snuff out the light, but placed the candlestick on the hearth.

When Aaron went out at the window, Little Crotchet was sound asleep, and seemed to be smiling. The Son of Ben Ali was smiling too, and continued to smile even as he descended the oak.

AARON AND LITTLE CROTCHET

Rambler was waiting for him, and, instead of being asleep, was wide awake and very much disturbed. One of the patrollers, no less a person than George Gossett,—young Grizzly, as Rambler named him,—had been to the spring for water. This was what disturbed the dog, and it was somewhat disturbing to Aaron; for the high wines or low wines, or whatever it was that was dealt out to them at the stillhouse, might make young Gossett and his companions bold enough to search the premises, even though Mr. Abercrombie had warned them that he could take care of his own place and wanted none of their interference in any way, shape, or form.

If Aaron could get to the stable, where the Black Stallion had his temporary quarters, all would be well. He could then proceed to carry out the idea he had in his mind, which was a very bold one, so bold that it might be said to depend on accident for its success.

The moon was shining brightly, even brilliantly, as Aaron stood at the corner of the great house and looked toward the horse lot. He could easily reach the negro quarters, he could even reach the black-jack thicket beyond, but he would be farther from the lot than ever, and still have an acre of moonlight to wade through. What he did was both bold and simple, and its very boldness made it successful.

He stepped back to the garden gate, threw it wide open, and slammed it to again. The noise was loud enough to be heard all over the place. George Gossett heard it and was sure the noise was made by Mr. Abercrombie. Aaron walked from the house straight toward the horse lot, whistling loudly and melodiously some catchy air he had heard the negroes sing. Rambler was whistling too, but the sound came through his nose, and it was not a tune, but a complaint and a warning.

Aaron paid no heed to the warning and cared nothing for the complaint. He went through the moonlight, whistling, and there was a swagger about his gait such as the negroes assume when they are feeling particularly happy. Behind a tree, not twenty-five yards away, George Gossett stood. Rambler caught his scent in the air and announced the fact by a low growl. But this announcement only made Aaron whistle the louder.

There was no need for him to whistle, if he had but known it; for when young Gossett heard the garden gate slammed to and saw what seemed to be a negro come away from the house whistling, he at once decided that some one of the hands had been receiving his orders from Mr. Abercrombie. Thus deciding, George Gossett paid no further attention to Aaron, but kept himself more closely concealed behind the tree that sheltered him. He looked at Aaron, and that more than once; but though the moonlight was brilliant, it was only moonlight after all.

Aaron disappeared in the deep shadows that fell about the horse lot, and George Gossett forgot in a few minutes that any one had waded through the pond of moonlight that lay shimmering between the garden gate and the lot where Timoleon held sway. Indeed, there was nothing about the incident to attract attention. As he stood leaning against the tree, young Gossett could see the negroes constantly passing to and fro about their cabins. There was no lack of movement. Some of the negroes carried torches of "fat" pine in spite of the fact that the moon was shining, and so made themselves more conspicuous. But this peculiarity was so familiar to the young man's experience that it never occurred to him to remark it.

He could even hear parts of their conversation, for they made not the slightest effort to suppress their voices or subdue their laughter, which was loud and long and frequent. It was especially vociferous when Turin came to the door of one of the cabins and cried to Uncle Fountain, who had just gone out:—

"Nigger man! You better not try to slip off to Spivey's dis night."

"How come, I like ter know?" said Uncle Fountain.

"Patterollers on de hill yander," replied Turin.

"How you know?" Uncle Fountain asked.

"I done seed um."

"What dey doin' out dar?"

"Ketchin' grasshoppers, I speck!"

From every cabin came a roar of laughter, and the whole plantation seemed to enjoy the joke. The calves in the ginhouse lot bleated, the dogs barked, the geese cackled, and the guinea hens shrieked "Potrack! run here! go back!" as loud as they could, and a peafowl, roosting on the pinnacle of the roof of the great house, joined in with a wailing cry that could be heard for miles.

BEHIND A TREE STOOD GEORGE GOSSETT

The lack of respect shown by the Abercrombie negroes for the patrollers irritated George Gossett, but it was a relief to him to know that if the negroes on his "pap's" place were to make any reference to the patrollers they would bow their heads and speak in subdued whispers.

From one of the cabins came the sound of "patting" and dancing, and the noise made by the feet of the dancer was so responsive to that made by the hands of the man who was patting that only an expert ear could distinguish the difference. The dance was followed by a friendly tussle, and a negro suddenly ran out at the door, pursued by another. The pursuer halted, however, and cried out:—

"Ef you fool wid me, nigger, I'll make Marster sen' you in de lot dar an' move dat ar' wil' hoss to his new stable."

"Marster was made 'fo' you wuz de maker," answered the pursued, who had now stopped running.

"Ding 'em!" said young Gossett in a low tone to himself, "they're always and eternally frolicking on this place. No wonder they ain't able to do no more work in the daytime!"

Fretting inwardly, the young man changed his position, and continued to watch for the runaway. How long he stood there young Gossett could not say. Whether the spirits he had swallowed at the stillhouse benumbed his faculties so that he fell into a doze, he did not know. He could only remember that he was aroused from apparent unconsciousness by a tremendous clamor that seemed to come from the hill where he had left the most of his companions. It was a noise of rushing and running, squealing horses, and the exclamations of frightened men.

Young Gossett did not pause to interpret the clamor that came to his ears, but ran back toward the hill as hard as he could go.

XII.

WHAT THE PATROLLERS SAW AND HEARD.

The scheme which Aaron had conceived, and which he proposed to carry out without delay, was bold, and yet very simple,—simple, that is to say, from his point of view. It came into his mind while he was in Little Crotchet's room, and fashioned itself as he went whistling to the horse lot in full view of George Gossett.

He swung himself over the fence, and made directly for Timoleon's stable. The Black Stallion heard some one fumbling about the door, and breathed hard through his nostrils, making a low, fluttering sound, as high-spirited horses do when they are suspicious or angry. It was a fair warning to any and all who might dare to open the door and enter that stable.

"So!" said Aaron; "that is the welcome you give to all who may come to make you comfortable."

At the sound of that voice, Timoleon snorted cheerfully and whinnied, saying: "Change places with me, Son of Ben Ali, and then see who will warn all comers. Why, the ox has better treatment, and the plow mule is pampered. What am I that my food should be thrown at me through the cracks? The man that fed me comes no more."

"He is where your teeth and your temper put him, Grandson of Abdallah. But there is to be a change. This night you go to your new house, where everything is fresh and clean and comfortable. And you are to learn to hold a bit in your mouth and a man on your back, as Abdallah before you did."

"That is nothing, Son of Ben Ali. Then I can gallop, and smell the fresh air from the fields. What man am I to carry, Son of Ben Ali?"

"Let the White-Haired Master settle that, Grandson of Abdallah. This night, before you go to your new house, you are to have a run with me."

Timoleon snorted with delight. He was ready, and more than ready. He was stiff and sore from standing in the stable.

"But before we start, Grandson of Abdallah, this must be said: No noise before I give the word; none of the loud screaming that men call whickering. You know my hand. You are to have a frolic, and a fine one, but before you begin it, wait for the word. Now, then, we will go."

With his hand on the horse's withers, Aaron guided Timoleon to the gate. They went through the lot in which the Black Stallion's new stable stood, out at the gate through which Buster John and Sweetest Susan rode years afterward, and into the lane that led to the public road. But instead of going toward the road, they followed the lane back into the plantation, until they came to what was called "the double gates." Going through these, they found themselves in the pasture that sloped gradually upward to the hill from which Aaron was in the habit of watching the light in Little Crotchet's window.

The hoofs of the Black Stallion hardly made a sound on the soft turf. Guided by Aaron, he ascended the hill until they were on a level with and not far from the fence on which Mr. Gossett, his son George, and Jim Simmons had carried on their controversy about Addison Abercrombie. Here Aaron brought Timoleon to a halt, while Rambler went forward to see what discovery he could make.

He soon found where the horses of the patrollers were stationed. There were five. Three had evidently been trained to "stand without tying," as the saying is, while one of the patrollers was sitting against a tree, holding the other two. All this Rambler knew, for he went so near that the patroller saw him, and hurled a pine burr at him. It was a harmless enough missile, but it had not left Rambler in a good humor. Then it was that Aaron spoke to the horse, and gave him the word.

"Grandson of Abdallah, the horses and the man are yonder. Give them a taste of your playfulness. Show them what a frolic is, but cover your teeth with your lips,—no blood to-night. Spare the horses. They have gone hungry for hours, but they must obey the bit. Spare the man, too, but if you can strip him of his coat as he flees, well and good. You will see other men come running. They will be filled with fear. Give them also a taste of your playfulness. Let them see the grandson of Abdallah when he is frolicsome. But mind! No blood to-night,—no broken bones!"

The situation promised to be so exciting that Timoleon snorted loudly and fiercely, whereupon one of the horses held by the patroller answered with a questioning neigh, which was cut short by a cruel jerk of the bridle rein by the man who held it. The man was dozing under the influence of Mr. Fullalove's low-wines, and the sudden neighing of the horse startled and irritated him.

But in the twinkling of an eye terror took the place of irritation, for the Black Stallion, pretending to himself that the neigh was a challenge, screamed fiercely in reply and went charging upon the group with open mouth and eyes that glowed in the dark. The horses knew well what that scream meant. Those that were not held by the patroller ran away panic-stricken, snorting, and whickering. The two that were held by the patroller cared nothing for bits now, but broke away from the man, after dragging him several yards (for he had the reins wrapped about his wrist) and joined the others.

They dragged the man right in the Black Stallion's path, and there left him straggling to his hands and knees, with his right arm so severely wrenched that he could hardly use it. But, fortunately for the patroller, Timoleon's eyes were keen, and he saw the man in time to leap over

him, screaming wildly as he did so. The man fell over on his side at that instant. Glancing upward he saw the huge hulk of the horse flying over him, and his reason nearly left him. Was it really a horse, or was it that arch-fiend Beelzebub that he had read about in the books, and whose name he had heard thundered from the pulpit at the camp meeting? "Beelzebub is abroad in the land to-day!" the preacher had cried. Was it indeed true?

The Black Stallion drove the crazed horses before him hither and yonder, but always turning them back to the point where they had been standing. The stampede was presently joined by three or four mules that had been turned in the pasture. The patrollers, who had been watching and guarding the approaches to the Abercrombie place, came running to see what the trouble was. George Gossett, being farther away from the pasture than the rest, was the last to reach the scene, but he arrived soon enough to see the Black Stallion seize one of his companions by the coat-tails and literally strip him of the garment.

THE BLACK STALLION

The terror-stricken horses, when they found an opportunity, ran toward the double gates where they had entered the pasture. Aaron, expecting this, had opened the gates, and the five horses, crowding on one another's heels, went through like a whirlwind, having left the mules far behind. Aaron closed the gates again, and went running to where he heard the Black Stallion still plunging about. By this time the mules were huddled together in a far corner of the field; but Timoleon had paid no attention to them. He could have caught and killed them over and over again. He was now in pursuit of the patrollers. George Gossett, running toward the fence, tripped and fell, and narrowly escaped the Black Stallion's hoofs. He was not far from the fence when he fell, and he rolled and scrambled and crawled fast enough to elude Timoleon, who turned and ran at him again. In one way and another all the patrollers escaped with their lives, and, once the fence was between them and the snorting demon, they made haste to visit Mr. Fullalove's stillhouse, and relate to him the story of their marvelous adventure, consoling themselves, meanwhile, with copious draughts of the warm low-wines.

"I believe the thing had wings," said one of the patrollers, "and if I didn't see smoke coming out of his mouth when he ran at me, I'm mighty much mistaken. I never shall believe it wasn't Beelzebub." This was the man who had been set upon so suddenly while watching the horses and dozing.

Some of the others were inclined to agree with this view of the case; but George Gossett was sure it was a horse.

"I was right at him," he said, "when he pulled off Monk's coat, and it was a horse, even to the mane and tail. I was looking at him when he turned and made for me. Then I tripped and fell, and just did get to the fence in time to save my neck."

"You hear that, don't you, Mr. Fullalove?" remarked the man who had been holding the horses. "It pulled Monk's coat off, and then Gossett just had time to get to the fence to save his neck! Why, it's as natchul as pig-tracks. Every hoss you meet tries to pull your coat off, and you have to run for a fence if you want to save your neck. That's Gossett's idee. If that thing was a hoss, I don't want to see no more hosses. I'll tell you that."

"Well," said Mr. Fullalove, "there are times and occasions-more espeshually occasions, as you may say—when a hoss mought take a notion for to cut up some such rippit as that. You take that black hoss of Colonel Abercrombie's—not a fortnight ago he got out of his pen and ketched a nigger and like to 'a' killed him."

"Maybe it's that same hoss in the field yonder," suggested George Gossett.

"No," replied Mr. Fullalove. "That hoss is penned up so he can't git out of his stable—much less the lot—if so be some un ain't took and gone and turned him out and led him to the field. And if that had 'a' been done you could 'a' heard him squealin' every foot of the way."

"If anybody wants to call the Old Boy a hoss," said the man who had been first attacked, "they are more than welcome."

"Boys," remarked Mr. Fullalove, "if any of you have got the idee that the Old Boy was after you, you'd better stay as fur from this stillhouse as you can, and try to act as if you had souls for to save. What have you done with your hosses?"

"We couldn't tote 'em, and so we had to leave 'em," Gossett answered, making a poor effort to laugh. "What I hate about it is that I took a fool notion and rode pap's horse to-night. He'll be hot as pepper."

"Ain't you going for to make some sorter effort to git your hosses out of the field?" inquired Mr. Fullalove.

"He can have my hoss and welcome," said the man who insisted on the Beelzebub theory.

"I wouldn't go in that field, not for forty horses," another patroller protested.

"I might go there for forty horses," said George Gossett, "but I'll not go back for one, even though it's pap's."

"Well, it's mighty quiet and serene up there now," suggested Mr. Fullalove, listening with his hand to his ear.

"He's caught 'em and now he's skinning 'em," said the man who believed Beelzebub was abroad that night.

The patrollers stayed at the stillhouse until the low-wines gave them courage, and then they went home with George Gossett. They were bold enough to go by the double gates, to see if they had been opened, but the gates were closed tight. They listened a few moments, but not a sound could be heard, save the loud, wailing cry of the peafowl that rested on the Abercrombie house. As they went along the road they found and caught four of the horses. The horse that George Gossett had ridden was safe at home.

The young men agreed on one thing, namely: That they would give the Abercrombie place the go-by for some time to come; while the man that thought he had seen Beelzebub said that he was sick of the whole business and would have no more of it, being more firmly convinced than ever that the scenes they had witnessed were supernatural. Even George Gossett declared that he intended to advise "pap" to sell the runaway, "if he could find anybody fool enough to buy him."

It must not be forgotten that though Gossett and his companions were the only ones that witnessed the terrifying spectacle presented by the Black Stallion as he ran screaming about the

pasture, they were not the only ones that heard the uproar that accompanied it. The negroes heard it, and every ear was bent to listen. Randall had his hand raised over his head and held it there, as he paused to catch the drift and meaning of the fuss. Big Sal was reaching in a corner for her frying-pan. She paused, half bent, her arm reaching out, while she listened. Turin was singing, but the song was suddenly cut short.

Mr. Abercrombie heard it, but his thoughts were far afield, and so he paid little attention to it. The geese, the guinea hens, and the peafowl heard it and joined heartily in with a loud and lusty chorus. Mammy Lucy heard it and came noiselessly to the library door and looked in inquiringly.

"What is the noise about, Lucy?" inquired Mr. Abercrombie.

"Dat what I wanter know, Marster. It soun' ter me like dat ar hoss done got loose agin."

Then the White-Haired Master, remembering that he had consented for Little Crotchet's "friend" to remove the Black Stallion to his new quarters, regretted that he had been so heedless. It was all his own fault, he thought, as he rose hastily and went out into the moonlight bare-headed. He called Randall and Turin, and both came running.

"Go out to the pasture there, and see what the trouble is."

"Yasser, yasser!" they cried, and both went rapidly toward the field. They ran until they got out of sight of their master, and then they paused to listen. They started again, but not so swiftly as before.

"I know mighty well dat Marster don't want us ter run up dar where we might git hurted," said Turin.

"Dat he don't!" exclaimed Randall.

Consoled by this view of the case, which was indeed the correct one, they moved slower and slower as they came close to the pasture fence. There they stopped and listened, and while they listened the uproar came to a sudden end—to such a sudden end that Randall remarked under his breath that it was like putting out a candle. For a few brief seconds not a sound fell on the ears of the two negroes. Then they heard a faint noise of some one running through the bushes in the direction of the stillhouse.

"Ef I could git de notion in my head dat Marster don't keer whedder we gits hurted er no," suggested Turin, "I'd mount dis fence an' go in dar an' see who been kilt an' who done got away."

"I speck we better not go," remarked Randall, "kaze ef we wuz ter rush in dar an' git mangled, Marster'd sholy feel mighty bad, an' fer one, I don't want ter be de 'casion er makin' 'im feel bad."

By this time Mr. Abercrombie had become impatient, and concluded to find out the cause of the uproar for himself. Randall and Turin heard him coming, and they could see that he was accompanied by some of the negroes. The two cautiously climbed the fence and went over into the field, moving slowly and holding themselves in readiness for instant flight. A cow bug, flying blindly, struck Turin on the head. He jumped as if he had heard the report of a gun, and cried out in a tone of alarm:—

"Who flung dat rock? You better watch out. Marster comin', an' he got his hoss pistol 'long wid 'im."

"'Twa'n't nothing but a bug," said Randall.

"It de fust bug what ever raised a knot on my head," Turin declared.

"What was the trouble, Randall?" inquired Mr. Abercrombie from the fence. His cool, decisive voice restored the courage of the negroes at once.

"We des tryin' fer ter fin' out, suh. Whatsomever de racket wuz, it stop, suh, time we got here—an' it seem like we kin hear sump'n er somebody runnin' to'rds de branch over yander," replied Randall heartily.

"Some of the mules were in the pasture to-day. See if they are safe."

"Yasser!" responded Randall, but his tone was not so hearty. Nevertheless, he and Turin cautiously followed the line of the fence until they found the mules in the corner in which they had taken refuge. And the mules showed they were very glad to see the negroes, following them back to the point where the path crossed the fence.

"De mules all safe an' soun', suh," explained Randall when they came to where the master was. "Dey er safe an' soun', but dey er swyeatin' mightily, suh."

"What do you suppose the trouble was?" inquired Mr. Abercrombie.

Turin and Randall had not the least idea, but Susy's Sam declared that he heard "dat ar hoss a-squealin'!"

"What horse?" inquired Mr. Abercrombie.

"Dat ar Sir Moleon hoss, suh," replied Susy's Sam.

"That's what Lucy said," remarked Mr. Abercrombie.

"Marster, ef dat ar hoss had er been in dar, me an' Turin wouldn't er stayed in dar long, an' dese yer mules wouldn't er been stan'in' in de fence corner up yander."

But Mr. Abercrombie shook his head. He remembered that he had given Little Crotchet permission to have the horse removed to his new quarters.

"Some of you boys see if he is in his stable," he said.

They all went running, and before Mr. Abercrombie could get there, though he walked fast, he met them all coming back. "He ain't dar, Marster!" they exclaimed in chorus.

"See if he is in his new stable," said Mr. Abercrombie.

Again they all went running, Mr. Abercrombie following more leisurely, but somewhat disturbed, nevertheless. And again they came running to meet him, crying out, "Yasser! yasser! He in dar, Marster; he sho is. He in dar an' eatin' away same like he been dar dis long time."

"See if the key is in the lock," said Mr. Abercrombie to Randall.

Randall ran back to the stable and presently called out:—

"Dey ain't no key in de lock, Marster."

Mr. Abercrombie paused as if to consider the matter, and during that pause he and Randall and Turin and Susy's Sam heard a voice saying:

"Look on the little Master's mantelpiece!"

The voice sounded faint and far away, but every word was clear and distinct.

"Where did the voice come from?" asked Mr. Abercrombie.

The negroes shook their heads. They didn't know. It might have come from the air above, or the earth beneath, or from any point of the compass.

"Ask where the key is," said Mr. Abercrombie to Turin. His curiosity was aroused.

Turin cried out: "Heyo, dar! Whar you say de key is?" But no reply came, not even so much as a whisper. The negroes looked at one another, and shook their heads.

When Mr. Abercrombie went back to the house he put on his slippers and crept to Little Crotchet's room. Shading the candle he carried, the father saw that his son was fast asleep.

And on the mantel was the key of the stable.

XIII.

THE APPARITION THE FOX HUNTERS SAW.

As the fall came on, the young men (and some of the older ones, too) began to indulge in the sport of fox hunting. They used no guns, but pursued Reynard with horse and hound in the English fashion. The foxes in that region were mostly gray, but the red ones had begun to come in, and as they came the grays began to pack up their belongings (as the saying is) and seek homes elsewhere.

The Turner old fields, not far from the Abercrombie place, and still closer to the Swamp, were famous for their foxes—first for the grays and afterward for the reds. There seemed to be some attraction for them in these old fields. The scrub pines, growing thickly together, and not higher than a man's waist, and the brier patches scattered about, afforded a fine covert for Mr. Fox, gray or red, being shady and cool in summer time, and sheltered from the cold winter winds. And if it was fine for Mr. Fox, it was finer for the birds; for here Mrs. Partridge could lead her brood in safety out of sight of Man, and here the sparrows and smaller birds were safe from the Blue Falcon, she of the keen eye and swift wing.

And Mr. Fox was as cunning as his nose was sharp. He knew that the bird that made its home in the Turner old fields must roost low; and what could be more convenient for Mr. Fox than that—especially at the dead hours of night when he went creeping around as noiselessly as a shadow, pretending that he wanted to whisper a secret in their ears? Indeed, that was the main reason why Mr. Fox lived in the Turner old fields, or went there at night, for he was no tree climber. And so it came to pass that when those who were fond of fox hunting wanted to indulge in that sport, they rose before dawn and went straight to the Turner old fields.

Now, when George Gossett and his patrolling companions ceased for a time to go frolicking about the country at night, on the plea that they were looking after the safety of the plantations, they concluded that it would be good for their health and spirits to go fox hunting occasionally. Each had two or three hounds to brag on, so that when all the dogs were brought together they made a pack of more than respectable size.

IT WAS FINE FOR MR. FOX

One Sunday, when the fall was fairly advanced, the air being crisp and bracing and the mornings frosty, these young men met at a church and arranged to inaugurate the fox hunting season the next morning. They were to go home, get their dogs, and meet at Gossett's, his plantation lying nearest to the Turner old fields. This programme was duly carried out. The young men stayed all night with George Gossett, ate breakfast before daybreak, and started for the Turner old fields. As they set out, a question arose whether they should go through the Abercrombie place—the nearest way—or whether they should go around by the road. The darkness of night was still over wood and field, but there was a suggestion of gray in the east. If the hunting party had been composed only of those who had been in the habit of patrolling with George Gossett, prompt choice would have been made of the public road; but young Gossett had invited an acquaintance from another settlement to join them—a gentleman who had reached the years of maturity, but who was vigorous enough to enjoy a cross-country ride to hounds.

This gentleman had been told of the strange experience of the patrollers in Mr. Abercrombie's pasture lot. Some of the details had been suppressed. For one thing, the young men had not confessed to him how badly they had been frightened. They simply told him enough to arouse his curiosity. When, therefore, the choice of routes lay between the public road and the short cut through the Abercrombie pasture, the gentleman was eager to go by way of the pasture where his young friends had beheld the wonderful vision that had already been described. When they displayed some hesitation in the matter, he rallied them smartly on their lack of nerve, and in this way shamed them into going the nearest way. George Gossett, who had no lack of mere physical courage, consented to lead the way if the others would "keep close behind him." But none of them except the gentleman who was moved by curiosity, and who attributed the mystery of the affair to frequent visits to Mr. Fullalove's still house, had any stomach for the journey through the pasture, for not even George Gossett desired to invite a repetition of the paralyzing scenes through which they had passed on that memorable night.

As they came to the double gates, the young man who had insisted that Timoleon was Beelzebub concluded to leave an avenue by which to escape if the necessity arose. So he rode forward, dismounted, and opened the gates. Then he made a great pretense of shutting them, but allowed them to remain open instead. This operation left him somewhat behind his companions, as he intended it should, for he had made up his mind to wheel his horse and run for it if he heard any commotion ahead of him. In that event the delay he purposely made would leave him nearest the gates.

Seeing that the young man did not come up as quickly as he should have done, George Gossett, in whom the spirit of mischief had no long periods of repose, suggested that they touch up their horses and give their companion a scare. This suggestion was promptly acted on. The commotion his companions made caused the young man to pause a moment before putting spur to his horses to rejoin them. This delay placed several hundred yards between him and the party with Gossett. He realized this as he rode after them, but was consoled by the fact that, in the event of any trouble, he had a better opportunity to escape than they did.

But he had hardly gone fifty yards from the double gates before he heard some sort of noise in that direction. He half turned in his saddle and looked behind him. The vague gray of the morning had become so inextricably mixed and mingled with the darkness of the night that such light as there was seemed to blur the vision rather than aid it. But when the young man turned in his saddle he saw enough to convince him that he was likely to have company in his ride after his companions.

He hesitated a moment before urging his horse into a more rapid gait. He wanted to see what it might be that was now so vaguely outlined. He strained his eyes, but could see nothing but a black and shapeless mass, which seemed to be following him. He could see that it was moving rapidly, whatever it was, but the gray light was so dim, and gave such shadowy shape even to objects close at hand, that he found it impossible either to gratify his curiosity or satisfy his fears. So he settled himself firmly in the saddle, clapped spurs to his horse, and rode headlong after his companions. He looked around occasionally, but the black mass was always nearer. The faster his horse went, the faster came the Thing.

THE PHANTOM HORSEMAN

Each time he looked back his alarm rose higher, for the Thing was closer whenever he looked. At last his alarm grew to such proportions that he ceased to look back, but addressed himself entirely to the work of urging his horse to higher speed. Presently he heard quick, fierce snorts on his right, and his eye caught sight of the Thing. Its course was parallel with his own, and it was not more than twenty yards away.

He saw enough for his alarm to rise to the height of terror. He saw something that had the head and feet of a black horse, but the body was wanting. No! There was a body, and a rider, but the rider wore a long, pale gray robe, and he was headless! If this was the Black Demon that the young man had seen in this pasture on a former occasion, he was now more terrible than ever, for he was guided by a headless rider!

The young man would have checked his horse, but the effort was in vain. The horse had eyes. He also had seen the Thing, and had swerved away from it, but he was too frightened to pay any attention to bit or rein. The Black Thing was going faster than the frightened horse, and it soon drew away, the pale gray robe of the rider fluttering about like a fierce signal of warning. The young man's horse was soon under control, and in a few minutes he came up with his companions. He found them huddled together like so many sheep, this manœuvre having been instinctively made by the horses. The dogs, too, were acting queerly.

The men appeared to be somewhat surprised to see their companion come galloping up to them. After riding away from the young man who had taken it upon himself to leave the double gates open, the huntsmen had concluded to wait for him when they came to the bars that opened on the public road. But the gallop of their horses had subsided into a walk when they were still some distance from that point. They were conversing about the merits of their favorite dogs when suddenly they heard from behind them the sound of a galloping horse. They saw, as the young man had seen, a dark, moving mass gradually assume the shape of a black horse, with a headless rider wearing a long, pale gray robe. The apparition was somewhat farther from them when it passed than it had been from their companion, whom, in a spirit of mischief, they had deserted; but the Black Thing threatened to come closer, for when it had gone beyond them it changed its course, described a half circle, and vanished from sight on the side of the pasture opposite to that on which it had first appeared.

"What do you think now?" said George Gossett, speaking in a low tone to the gentleman who had been inclined to grow merry when the former experience of the patrollers was mentioned.

"What do I think? Why, I think it's right queer if the chap we left at the double gates isn't trying to get even with us by riding around like a wild Indian and waving his saddle blanket," replied the doubting gentleman.

"Why, man, he's riding a gray horse!" one of the others explained.

This put another face on the matter, and the gentleman made no further remark. In fact, before anything else could be said, the young man in question came galloping up.

"Did you fellows see It?" he inquired. But he had no need to inquire. Their attitude and the uneasy movements of their horses showed unmistakably that they had seen It. "Which way did It go?" was the next question. There was no need to make reply. The direction in which the huntsmen glanced every second showed unmistakably which way It went.

"Let's get out of here," said the young man in the next breath. And there was no need to make even this simple proposition, for by common consent, and as by one impulse, horses and men started for the bars at a rapid trot. When the bars were taken down they were not left down. Each one was put carefully back in its proper place, for though this was but a slight barrier to interpose between themselves and the terrible Black Thing, yet it was something.

Once in the road they felt more at ease—not because they were safer there, but because it seemed that the night had suddenly trailed its dark mantle westward.

"Did you notice," said the young man who was first to see the apparition, "that the Thing that was riding the Thing had no head?"

"It certainly had that appearance," replied the doubtful gentleman, "but"—

"No 'buts' nor 'ifs' about it," insisted the young man. "It came so close to me that I could 'a' put my hand on it, and I noticed particular that the Thing on the back of the Thing didn't have no sign of head, no more than my big toe has got a head."

The exaggeration of the young man was unblushing. If the Thing had come within ten yards of him he would have fallen from his horse in a fit.

"And what was you doing all that time?" George Gossett inquired. His tone implied a grave doubt.

"Trying to get away from that part of the country," replied the other frankly. "It was the same hoss that got after us that night," the young man continued. "I knowed it by the blaze in his eyes and the red on the inside of his nose. Why, it looked to me like you could 'a' lit a cigar by holding it close to his eyes."

"I know how skeery you are," said George Gossett disdainfully, "and I don't believe you took time to notice all these things."

"Skeer'd!" exclaimed the other; "why, that ain't no name for it—no name at all. But it was my mind that was skeered and not my eyes. You can't help seeing what's right at you, can you?"

This frankness took the edge off any criticism that George Gossett might have made, seeing

which the young man gave loose reins to his invention, which was happy enough in this instance to fit the suggestions that fear had made a place for in the minds of his companions.

But it was all the simplest thing in the world. The apparition the fox hunters saw was Aaron and the Black Stallion. The Son of Ben Ali had decided that the interval between the first faint glimpse of dawn and daylight was the most convenient time to give Timoleon his exercise, and to fit him in some sort for the vigorous work he was expected to do some day on the race track. Aaron had hit upon that particular morning to begin the training of the Black Stallion, and had selected the pasture as the training-ground. It was purely a coincidence that he rode in at the double gates behind the fox hunters, but it was such a queer one that Little Crotchet laughed until the tears came into his eyes when he heard about it.

Aaron's version of the incident was so entirely different from that of the fox hunters that those who heard both would be unable to recognize in them an account of the same affair from different points of view. As Aaron saw it and knew it, the incident was as simple as it could be. As he was riding the horse along the lane leading to the double gates (having left Rambler behind at the stable), Timoleon gave a snort and lifted his head higher than usual.

"Son of Ben Ali," he said, "I smell strange men and strange horses. Their scent is hot on the air. Some of them are the men that went tumbling about the pasture the night you bade me play with them."

"Not at this hour, Grandson of Abdallah," replied Aaron.

"I am not smelling the hour, Son of Ben Ali, but the men. If we find them, shall I use my teeth?"

"We'll not see the men, Grandson of Abdallah. This is not their hour."

"But if we find them, Son of Ben Ali?" persisted the Black Stallion.

"Save your teeth for your corn, Grandson of Abdallah," was the response.

As they entered the double gates, which Aaron was surprised to find open, Timoleon gave a series of fierce snorts, which was the same as saying, "What did I tell you, Son of Ben Ali? Look yonder! There is one; the others are galloping farther on."

"I am wrong and you are right, Grandson of Abdallah."

As much for the horse's comfort as his own, Aaron had folded a large blanket he found hanging in the stable, and was using it in place of a saddle. He lifted himself back toward Timoleon's croup, seized the blanket with his left hand, and, holding it by one corner, shook out the folds. He had no intention whatever of frightening any one, his sole idea being to use the blanket to screen himself from observation. He would have turned back, but in the event of pursuit he would be compelled to lead his pursuers into the Abercrombie place, or along the public road, and either course would have been embarrassing. If he was to be pursued at all, he preferred to take the risk of capture in the wide pasture. As a last resort he could slip from Timoleon's back and give the horse the word to use both teeth and heels.

AARON AND TIMOLEON

And this was why the fox hunters saw the apparition of a black horse and a headless rider.

"Shall I ride him down, Son of Ben Ali?" snorted the Black Stallion.

"Bear to the right, bear to the right, Grandson of Abdallah," was the reply.

And so the apparition flitted past the young man who had left the double-gates open, and past his companions who were waiting for him near the bars that opened on the big road; flitted past them and disappeared.

Finding that there was no effort made to pursue him, Aaron checked the Black Stallion and listened. He heard the men let down the bars and put them up again, and by that sign he knew they were not patrollers.

Later on in the day, the doubting gentleman, returning from the fox hunt, called by the Abercrombie place and stopped long enough to tell the White-Haired Master of the queer sight he saw in the pasture at dawn.

"The boys were badly scared," he explained to Mr. Abercrombie, "and I tell you it gave me a strange feeling—a feeling that I can best describe by saying that if the earth had opened at my feet and a red flame shot up, it wouldn't have added one whit to my amazement. That's the honest truth."

Mr. Abercrombie could give him no satisfaction, though he might have made a shrewd guess, and Little Crotchet, who could have solved the mystery, had to make an excuse to get out of the way, so that he might have a hearty laugh.

And Aaron, when he came to see the Little Master that night, knew for the first time that he had scared the fox hunters nearly out of their wits.

XIV.

THE LITTLE MASTER SAYS GOOD-NIGHT.

After George Gossett's two experiences in the pasture, he came to the conclusion that it would not be profitable to do any more patrolling on the Abercrombie place, but this did not add to his good humor. He had his father's surly temper, and, with it, a vindictive spirit that was entirely lacking in the elder Gossett. Moreover, age had not moderated nor impaired his energies, as it had his father's.

The fact that he had failed to capture Aaron struck him as a personal affront. He was stung by it. He felt that he and his father had been wronged by some one, he couldn't say who, but not by the runaway, for what was a "nigger," anyhow? After a while the idea was borne in upon him that somehow he and his family had been "insulted" by the Abercrombies. He arrived at this conclusion by a very circuitous route. The Abercrombies were harboring a Yankee in their house; and if they had the stomach to do that, why wasn't it just as easy for them to harbor "pap's" runaway nigger, especially when they were so keen to buy him?

Another thing that stung him, though he never mentioned it, was the sudden and unexplainable attitude of his father toward Aaron. Young Gossett had observed that his father appeared to lose interest in the runaway after Mr. Jim Simmons failed to catch him, but the fact was not impressed upon the young man's mind until the day he told the elder Gossett about the queer sight he saw in Abercrombie's pasture.

"Were you hunting the runaway?" his father asked, with some impatience.

"Why, no, pap. We weren't doing a thing in the world, but crossing the pasture on our way to the Turner old fields."

"Very well, then. Do as I do; let him alone. If you don't you'll get hurt. I know what I'm talking about."

This fairly took George's breath away. "Why, pap!" he cried; "ain't he your nigger? Didn't you buy him and pay your money down for him? Don't you want him out of the woods? And who's going to hurt me, pap?"

"You mind what I tell you," snapped the elder Gossett. "I'm older than you, and when I know a thing I know it. Let the runaway alone."

"If I'm going to be hurt," responded George doggedly, "I'd like to know who'll do it."

It would have been better for both if Mr. Gossett had told his son of his experience with Aaron. As it was, George was in danger of losing the little respect he had for his father. When he was warned that he would be hurt if he kept on trying to capture Aaron, he suspected at once that the warning related to Mr. Abercrombie. Who else would dare to hurt him, or even threaten to hurt him? Certainly not the runaway. Who, then, but Abercrombie?

The suggestion was enough. It made George Gossett so furious that he never thought to reflect that he himself had invented it. Once invented, however, every circumstance seemed to fit it. His father had suddenly lost interest in the runaway, though he had paid out money for him, and had hardly received a week's work in return. Why? Because Mr. Abercrombie had overawed his father in a crowd, just as he did the day Aaron was sold from the block. The young man had not forgotten that episode, and his resentment was rekindled and grew hotter than ever, for it was now reinforced by inward shame and disgust at the way his father had allowed himself to be overcome—and that, too, in regard to his own property.

The first result of George Gossett's resentment was his nearly successful effort to make the Teacher, Richard Hudspeth, the victim of the violent and natural prejudice that existed at that time against abolitionists; an event that has been related in "The Story of Aaron." The rescue of the Teacher by Mr. Abercrombie, and the fact that George Gossett was knocked flat by the Black Stallion, caused his resentment to rise to a white heat. He brooded over the matter until, at last, a desire to injure Mr. Abercrombie became an uncontrollable mania, and it went so far that one night, inflamed by whiskey, he set fire to the dwelling-house of the man he believed to be his father's enemy.

Then it was that Aaron rescued Little Crotchet and Free Polly, and fell fainting to the ground. And then it was that Mr. Gossett seized the first plausible opportunity that had presented itself to sell Aaron to Mr. Abercrombie. It is true, he drove a sharp bargain, suspecting that the runaway had seriously injured himself; but he would have sold Aaron in any event, being anxious to get rid of him.

George Gossett disappeared that night and was seen no more in that region. Years afterward, a homesick Georgian returning from Texas brought word that George Gossett had made a name for himself in that State, being known as a tough and a terror.

It's an ill wind that blows no good to any one. George Gossett little knew, when he applied the torch to the Abercrombie dwelling, that the light of it would call Aaron from the wildwoods and show him the way to a home where he was to live, happy in the love of Little Crotchet and of children as yet unborn, and happy in the respect and confidence of those whose interest he served.

Perhaps if George Gossett could have looked into the future, the blaze that produced these

results would never have been kindled, and in that event the story of Aaron in the Wildwoods could have been spun out at greater length, but the conclusion would not have been different.

Richard Hudspeth remained long enough to see Aaron duly installed in his new home, for the Abercrombie mansion was at once rebuilt on a larger scale than ever, and to see him serve as the major-domo of the establishment. But the departure of the Teacher was not delayed for many months after his experience with the reckless and irresponsible young men who had placed themselves under the leadership of George Gossett. Duties more pressing and more important than those he had assumed in Georgia called him to his Northern home, where a larger career awaited him—a career that made him famous.

He became the most intimate adviser of Abraham Lincoln, and that great man found in him what, at the outset, he found in few New England men, the deepest sympathy and highest appreciation.

It was characteristic of Richard Hudspeth that the treatment he received at the hands of George Gossett and his night riders bred no resentment against the Southern people, and the trait of character that shut the door of his mind against all petty prejudices and rancorous judgments was precisely the trait that attracted first the notice and finally the friendship of Mr. Lincoln.

Aaron was as much of a mystery to the negroes on the Abercrombie place when he came to move about among them as he was when he roamed in the wildwoods. He was as much of a mystery to them years afterwards, when Buster John and Sweetest Susan came upon the scene, as he was when he first made his appearance on the place, but by that time the mystery he presented was a familiar one. The negroes had not solved it, but they were used to it.

At first it seemed that they would never cease to wonder. They watched his every movement, and always with increasing awe and respect. He went about among them freely, but not familiarly. He was not of them, and they knew it. He was kind and considerate, especially where the women and children were concerned, but always reserved, always dignified, always serious. Yet he never lost his temper, never frowned, and was never known to utter an angry word or make a gesture of irritation. He had the remarkable gift of patience, that seemed to be so highly developed in some animals. It was Uncle Fountain who drew the parallel between the patience displayed by Aaron and that of the animals, and added this, after turning the matter over in his mind: "Mo' speshually de creeturs what kin see in de dark."

On rare occasions Aaron would go into one of the cabins where the negroes were enjoying themselves, and there would be a mighty hustling around in that cabin until he had the most comfortable chair, or stool, or bench, or tub turned bottom-side up. At such times he would say, "Sing!" And then, after some display of shyness, Randall or Turin would strike into a quaint plantation melody, and carry it along; and as their voices died away the powerful and thrilling tenor of Susy's Sam, and Jemimy's quavering soprano would take up the refrain, all the singers joining in at the close. No matter what melody was sung, or what words were employed, the instinct and emotions of the negroes gave to their performance the form and essence of true balladry,—the burden, the refrain, the culmination, and the farewell; or, as the writers of pretty verse now call it, the envoi.

Often on such occasions Aaron would enter the negro cabin bearing the Little Master in his arms. And then the negroes were better pleased, for the Little Master somehow seemed to stand between them and the awesome being they knew as Aaron. At such times the arms of Big Sal ached to hold Little Crotchet, the lad seemed to be so pale and frail. Once she made bold to say to Aaron:—

"I kin hol' 'im some ef you tired."

"I won't be tired of that till I'm dead," responded Aaron.

"I know mighty well how dat is," responded Big Sal humbly. "I des wanted ter hol' 'im. I *has* helt him."

"She wants to hold you," said Aaron to the Little Master.

And the reply was, "Well, why not?"

Whereupon Big Sal took the lad in her arms, and when the rest began to sing she swayed her strong body back and forth, and joined in the song with a voice so low and soft and sweet that it seemed to be the undertone of melody itself; and the effect of it was so soothing that when the song was ended the Little Master was fast asleep and smiling, and Big Sal leaned over him with such a yearning at her heart that only a word or a look would have been necessary to set her to weeping. Neither then nor ever afterwards did she know the reason why or seek to discover it. Enough for her that it was so.

Something in her attitude told the rest of the negroes that the Little Master was asleep, and so when they sang another song they pitched their voices low,—so low that the melody seemed to come drifting through the air and in at the door from far away. When it was ended nothing would do but each negro must come forward on tiptoe and take a look at the Little Master, who was still asleep and smiling.

When Aaron rose to go Big Sal was somewhat embarrassed. She didn't want the Little Master awakened, and yet she didn't know how he could be transferred to Aaron's arms without arousing him. But the Son of Ben Ali solved that problem. He nodded to Big Sal and motioned toward the door, and she, carrying the Little Master in her strong arms, went out into the dark. Aaron paused at the threshold, raised his right hand above his head, and followed Big Sal. This gesture he always made by way of salutation and farewell on the threshold of every door he entered or

went out of, whether the room was full of people or empty. Whether it was the door of his master's house or of Timoleon's stable, he paused and raised his right hand.

BIG SAL HOLDS THE LITTLE MASTER

The negroes noted it, and, simple as it was, it served to deepen the mystery in which Aaron seemed to be enveloped; and among themselves they shook their heads and whispered that he must be a "cunjur" man.

But Aaron was not troubled by whisperings that never reached his ears, nor by the strange imaginings of the negroes. He had other things to think of—one thing in particular that seemed to him to be most serious. He could see that Little Crotchet was gradually growing weaker and weaker. It was some time before he discovered this. We know that the trunks of trees slowly expand, but we do not see the process going on.

Little Crotchet seemed to be growing weaker day by day, and yet the process was so gradual that only the most careful observation could detect it. The burning of the house was something of a shock to him. He was not frightened by that event, and never for a moment lost his self-possession; but the spectacle of the fierce red flames mounting high in the air, their red tongues darting out and lapping about in space, and then, having found nothing to feed on, curling back and devouring the house, roaring and growling, and snapping and hissing,—this spectacle was so unexpected and so impossible in that place that the energy Little Crotchet lost in trying to fit the awful affair to his experience never came back to him. He never lost the feeling of numbness that came over him as he saw the house disappear in smoke and flame.

But it was weeks—months—after that before Aaron made his discovery, a discovery that could only be confirmed by the keenest and most patient watchfulness. For Little Crotchet was never more cheerful. And he was restless, too; always eager to be going. But Aaron soon saw that if the lad went galloping about on the Gray Pony as often as before, he did not go so far. Nor did he use his crutches so freely,—the crutches on which he had displayed such marvelous nimbleness.

And so from day to day Aaron saw that the Little Master was slowly failing. The lad found the nights longer, and Aaron had great trouble to drive away the red goblin, Pain. Thus the days slipped by, and the weeks ran into months, and the months counted up a year lacking a fortnight. This fortnight found the Little Master in bed both day and night, still happy and cheerful, but weak and pale. Always at night Aaron was sitting by the bed, and sometimes the lad would send for Big Sal. He was so cheerful that he deceived everybody except the doctor and Aaron as to his condition.

But one day the doctor came and sat by the Little Master's bedside longer than usual. The lad was cheerful as ever, but the doctor knew. As he was going away he gave some information to the father and mother that caused them to turn pale. The mother, indeed, would have rushed weeping to her son. Was it for this,—for this,—her darling child had been born? The doctor stayed her. It was indeed for this her darling child had been born. Would she hasten it? Why not let the mystery come to him as a friend and comforter,—as the friend of friends,—as a messenger from our dear Lord, the Prince of Peace and Joy?

And so the poor mother dried her eyes as best she could and took her place by the Little Master's bedside. The lad was cheerful and his eyes were as bright as a bird's. Doctors do not know everything, the mother thought, and, taking heart of hope, smiled as Little Crotchet prattled away.

Nothing would do but he must have a look at the toys that used to amuse him when he was a little bit of a boy; and in getting out the old toys the mother found a shoe he had worn when he first began to walk,—a little shoe out at the toe and worn at the heel.

This interested the lad more than all the toys. He held it in his hand and measured it with his thumb. And was it truly true that he had ever worn a shoe as small as that? The shoe reminded him of something else he had been thinking of. He had dreamed that when he got well he would need his crutches no more, and he wondered how it would feel to walk with his feet on the ground.

And there was the old popgun, too, still smelling of chinaberries. If Aaron only but knew it, that popgun had been a wonderful gun. Yes, siree! the bird that didn't want to get hurt when that popgun was in working order had to run mighty fast or fly mighty high. But, heigh-ho! he was too old and too large for popguns now, and when he got well, which would be pretty soon, he would have a sure-enough gun, and then he would get a powder flask and a shot bag and mount the Gray Pony and shoot—well, let's see what he would shoot: not the gray squirrels, they were too pretty; not the shy partridges, they might have nests or young ones somewhere; not the rabbits—they were too funny with their pop eyes and big ears. Well, he could shoot at a mark, and that's just what he would do.

And when night fell, the Little Master wanted to hear the negroes sing. And he wanted mother and father and sister to hear them too—not the loud songs, but the soft and sweet ones. But the negroes wouldn't feel like singing at all if everybody was in the room with them, and mother and father and sister could sit in the next room and pretend they were not listening. And so it was arranged.

When the negroes arrived and were ushered into the room by Mammy Lucy, they were so embarrassed and felt so much out of place they hardly knew what to do, or say, or how to begin. Aaron was carrying the Little Master in his arms, walking up and down, up and down, and his long strides and supple knees gave a swinging motion to his body that was infinitely soothing and restful to the Little Master. Swinging back and forth, up and down, the Son of Ben Ali paid no attention to the negroes, and they stood confused for a moment, but only for a moment. Suddenly there came streaming into the room the strain of a heart-breaking melody, rising and falling, falling and rising, as the leaves of a weeping willow are blown by the wind; drifting away and

floating back, as the foam of the wave is swayed by the sea.

Little Crotchet lay still in Aaron's arms for ever so long. Was he listening? Who knows? He was almost within hearing of the songs of the angels. Suddenly he raised his head in the pause of the song—

"Tell them all good-night. Tell mother"—

Aaron stopped his swinging walk and placed the Little Master on the bed and stood beside it, his right hand raised above his head. It might have been a benediction, it might have been a prayer. The negroes interpreted it as a signal of dismissal. One by one they went softly to the bedside and gazed on the Little Master. He might have been asleep, for he was smiling. Each negro looked inquiringly at Aaron, and to each he nodded, his right hand still lifted above his head.

THE DEATH OF THE LITTLE MASTER

Big Sal had waited till the last, and she was the only one that said a word.

"He look des like he did when he drapt asleep in deze arms," she cried, sobbing as though her heart would break, "an' I thank my God fer dat much! But oh, man, what a pity! What a pity!"

And she went out of the house into the yard, and through the yard into the lot, and through the lot to the negro cabins, crying, "*Oh, what a pity! what a pity!*"

Not for the Little Master, for he was smiling at the glorious vision of peace and rest that he saw when he said good-night. Not pity for the lad, but for those he had left behind him, for all who loved him; for all who had depended on his thoughtfulness; for all the weary and sorrowful ones. *Oh, what a pity!* Over and over again, *what a pity!* And the wind flowing softly about the world took up the poor negro's wailing cry and sent it over the hill and beyond, and the outlying messengers of the Swamp took it up—*What a pity!* And the Willis-Whistlers piped low, and the mysteries, swaying and slipping through the canes and tall grass, heard the whispered echo and sighed, *Oh, what a pity!*

Transcriber's Notes

A number of words in this book had both hyphenated and non-hyphenated variants; for those words the variant more frequently used was retained. This book also contains dialect and vernacular conversation.

Obvious punctuation errors were fixed.

Other printing errors, which were not detected during the revision of the printing process of the original book, have been corrected.

It was unclear if in the expression "simple as a-b ab" the second "ab" should be hyphenated. It was decided to keep the text unchanged.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK AARON IN THE WILDWOODS ***

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