

POWER LOT

A Story of "Down East"

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CHAPTER XXIII.—Continued.

She was to impersonate "Grief," and the young fry of the Sunday School were to mount the platform to her, one by one, and try to solace her by handing her each a bouquet, and at the same time repeating a Scripture quotation to her, that was the whole scheme; but Cuby made it sufficient in composition, and thrilling and ornate in practice.

She sailed onto the platform with a sweep and a trailing of old sable-hued garments, lent from many sources for the occasion. It was supposed that she would stand up and declaim her part—I understood it was so done in the rehearsals—but having got the whole ship under her command now, as it were, she seemed to consider that it might take a tedious long while for the children to get posted up fresh on their recitations, and he made to hold their noses properly, and prodded up to mounting the stage before so many people; so, what does she do, as soon as she'd sailed onto the boards herself, but wave her hand with all the hauteur and majesty of an accomplished tragedy queen, and, says she, in a deep contralto that filled every part of the room:

"A chair. Bring to me a chair, and quickly."

It wasn't long before she was provided with a chair, and she sat down and arranged her draperies so they'd give the most imposing effect all round her, then she crossed her little feet, in some new boots, and stuck 'em out where they'd show to the best advantage; and so, being fixed all right, "Grief" began her lingo in expectation of the advance of some young one or other with a posy bunch and a Scripture passage.

"I am alone, alone," declaimed Cuby, in that splendid, pervading contralto, and with a self-possession upon her beyond all words of mine to describe: "alone with my gret sorrow. The deep-a-ness of my woe and dess-pair no mortal may know-a, or pour an a oint-a-ment on the tears that weep of my bleeting, all-broken hairt," and she took out a handkerchief and gave a dab at her brown eyes, that were bright and gay as jewels.

"What is there before me," she trained on, "but the dar-rk entrance to the tomb—where lays all the daid folks."

Cuby's piece, at this point, was all spoken up; it was time for a kid to appear with a bouquet, which part of the programme being still unaccountably delayed, the leading lady proceeded to improvise, without hesitation or embarrassment.

"Where lays all the daid folks. Oh, my griff is so drate-ful—it is tuff—tuff—tuff—"

At this crisis a small boy mercifully appeared on the scene, his cheeks still wet with rebellious tears, and his flowers of consolation trailing rudely at his side, like a string of mackerel.

Cuby sighted him with what must have been relief, though her manner recognized no possibility of failure at any odds.

"Who are you?" she demanded, according to rote now, "who are you, that thus intrude upon the s-s-sacred domen of my griff? Come you to mek a mock at me? Depairt—for me, I would fen be left alone with my so drate-ful sorrow."

The solemnly enunciated words, the forbidding hauteur in Cuby's stunning, bright eyes bewildered the boy's progress beyond all hope. With a scream, he threw the bouquet in a passion of terror at her head, and, forgetting utterly the preconcerted text with which he had come to assuage her grief, he fled from the scene.

Cuby bit her lip contemptuously,

but swung on, undismayed, supplying the missing link in the action of the piece by her own inventiveness and sang froid.

"The Bible talks, w'at they bring at me," she averred, "meks no deference on my griff. It is continue on me all the sem. I theenk it grows worsen on me every meenute. Oh, it is tuff—"

The flow of Cuby's improvisation was opportunely interrupted by the approach this time of a little girl in a starched white skirt and hair that had palpably but just been released from a night's seclusion in curl papers. She was a nervous little creature, and she advanced rapidly, as one urged to keen endeavor by a comparison of her case with that of the futile little boy who had bawled stupidly and thrown his nosegay at Cuby's head. She should have repeated first her text of consolation, but in her wild haste she thrust the bouquet instantly into Cuby's hand with a curtsy done by lightning.

"Ezekiel, first chapter, third verse," she threw out, briskly enough, but there memory failed her.

"Ezekiel, first chapter, third verse," she shrieked out once more, desperately.

Cuby's proper proceeding was still to bewail her woes, and to bid this new comforter also to "Begone." But Cuby's heart was moved by the little girl's distress, and originality and good sense triumphed over the cold dictates of preconceived art.

"Do not you cry, Minnee," she said blandly, soothingly, and unspeakably at her ease. "Was you over to the cave this mornin', Minnee? The leetle halibuts is comin' in there fine. I seen a leetle girl no beeger'n as you ketch-a them off the w'arf. Ef you come to-morrow, me, I tek care of you."

The familiar face and pleasant voice quite reassured Minnie. She sucked down her expiring sobs by applying the hem of her skirt to her mouth.

"All right. I'll ask mamma—I'll come, anyway," she added hastily, "cause mamma likes me to ketch halibuts."

The play by this time varied so widely from its original method, Cuby set it back into the channel with a dash of her own.

"Go you down," she exhorted her latest comforter, kindly and firmly, and, as the sprite vanished, Cuby recollected her woes magnificently.

"Is there none, none," she cried, "that may help me in my so desolate? Ah, woe iss to me; naught—naught can assweg' my griff but the dar-rk passage to the tomb."

Cuby was tremendous, her voice and manner wonderful. I admired her without question, where I sat; and as her eyes, after a fresh dab from her handkerchief, glanced my way, I smiled my marvelling applause.

"Grief" gave me a composed, almost undiscoverable wink, clear to me alone; such was her art, it affected not at all the tragic melodrama of her features; and she continued superbly:

"C'iss, c'iss, to pile upon me the v'en and goddy masses of your floral off'rings," she admonished the empty stage. "C'iss to mek trouble me with your v'en words of console," she said, throwing up her hands in piteous appeal against the tidy lot of comforters that were failing altogether to put in an appearance.

But Rhody Ditmarse had a part to do. She had been supplied with a hat from some source—I suspected her adorer, Rob—fit to make her eligible for select and solemn occasions like the present; and her little soul was full of business. For a week past she had been curing up the warts on her tough little hands by the approved methods known to Power Lot; that is, she had split a bean and rubbed it over the afflicted members, and then buried it safe away under a rock. Some, less conscientious, did the infected bean up in a neat package and left it by the roadside, whereupon the one who innocently picked it up transferred the wart to his own person. Rhody's tried and stout little heart revolted

at the thought of bringing any fresh calamity upon the already overburdened and suffering human race. Her bean was immune from working further ill.

So here she was, with a Sunday equipment by way of raiment, and receding warts; one of the epitomes of consolation who in due course was to approach "Grief," erstwhile known as Cuby Tee-bo, with flowers and a text.

It was not properly Rhody's turn, but the flag of distress having been hoisted in behalf of the other comforters, she accepted without question the duty devolving prematurely upon her. Being sharp and quick of memory, she had also assimilated as many of the lost texts as possible, with their accompanying bouquets; and thus, with intellect and body both weighted after the similitude of a packhorse, she stepped sturdily up on to the platform. Her dress, demurely long for a child of her years, revealed only the strong foundations of some cowhide shoes, which tramped across the stage toward Cuby with the fearless and unrelenting tread of Retribution itself.

"Thessalony '—'Psa'ms'—'Coronations,'" grimly did Rhody, with a citation of the proper authority in every instance, deliver one text after another into the light and inattentive ear of "Grief." "Grief" wearied of the monologue. A speech of her own had been for some time due, and she now interpolated the same without hesitation.

"Biggone," said the sorrow-en-throned lady, fixing upon Rhody a look of weary disgust. "Biggone. Thou who would-est assweg' my griff, you mek me worsen—you make me seeck," she added daringly on her own account, and she yawned—for Cuby was healthy and a regular sleeper, and the steady drone of Rhody's voice was soporific.

"You are not to 'Biggone' me, Cuby Tee-bo," answered Rhody sternly. "Them that you was to say 'Biggone' to has all giv' out. They won't come up and I'm a-doin' of it all; and you got ter get comforted on me, an' boo-hoo an' repent, the way it is in the book."

Cuby stared blankly at the unalterable severity—from what strain of Puritan ancestry, who knows?—cast upon little Rhody's features. But with a flash of Latin adaptability, "Grief" triumphed, and still carried of the situation at last with glory.

"So they come no more, Rhode?" she said gently, with a soft sigh of satisfaction.

"You got ter git comforted on me," repeated Rhody.

"My griff," now readily assented Cuby, sweetly and clearly, with splendid action, "my griff is all assweg'. Your floral off'rings, your so swit' words from the Hollee Babble have lift' me up to mek of me a joy so beeg as once was my so gre't griff. I bless-a an' cariss-a you all, and will now retire to my apart-a-mong to give t'anks for all w'at is on me."

Cuby rose, and sailed with a chastened, though supreme, majesty from the stage.

Her performance was regarded as something transcendent throughout. Other numbers of the evening's programme, assumed by some of the maturer members of the Sunday School, followed; but they appeared trite; they lacked salt and savor altogether, after what had been.

When a little girl, whom you have seen wading barefoot among the clam flats, or halloing like a boy at you from some perch in the tree branches, suddenly sails superbly before you, long and willowy in black robes, a Madonna sweetness upon her features, a faultless self-possession in her bearing—it sets you to wondering how it all came about. The toss of Cuby's head at the congratulations she received, as she reappeared, brilliant, in her accustomed heribbioned garb among the audience, did not detract from this marvel.

As for Rhody, she was accepted by the whole Sunday School, youth and old, as a stalwart and promising pillar miraculously supplied to a decay-

ing tabernacle. She went back to the bench where Rob sat with Mrs. Skipper and Caroline. Rob's welcoming smile was genial as the sun at noonday, and expressed so much pride of Rhody that she blushed slightly herself for vanity of her performance—for the first and only time that evening.

But I was watching closely another face that had but just entered, in a dim corner of the hall; a face that was staring at Rob Hilton with a sort of fixed horror.

On that night when I brought Rob home from Waldeck I had asked Mary if Bate was in the house. "No," she said; "Bate has not been here for two nights, Jim."

Rob and I had landed late at night. No one had seen us, and Rob, with his inflamed arm, had not been out since until this evening. So I doubted if any word of Rob, living, had reached Bate.

I made my way quietly down to where he stood.

"Come on out, Bate," I said. "I want a word with you."

My voice seemed to rouse him from the shackles of a nightmare. He followed me out stupidly. He had on a new suit of clothes, with a fine linen shirt, and a watch and chain, and new boots to match, and he was holding a big cigar in his terror-palsied hand.

I believe I have never seen anything so pathetic under heaven as the new clothes on that shivering, convicted wretch. Innocence and martyrdom are not so pathetic to me; they have strong white wings that earthly mischance only set free for the upper kingdoms and an incontrovertible estate—but the idiocy of the evil, sucking still rapaciously from the dregs of a poisoned glass, God must mend that, as there are some bodies beyond the skill of earthly physicians to set straight. God, He will mend all; that I believe. You have your notion of pathos, I have mine; and to me Bate Stingaree was pathetic, beyond tears, to what wrings a man's very soul.

But I had to look out for his not following and persecuting Rob any further. I had to put chain and muzzle on him, so to speak, and I went straight to my job.

"Bate," I said, "you and Gar Tee-bo sailed over to Waldeck after us. I know just where you got your boat, I know just the spot where you anchored out of sight; and you sneaked in your dory off the ledges and went ashore, and watched your chance. You felled Rob Hilton in a flash, creeping up behind him like a snake, in a dark alleyway. You took his money and threw him over for dead into the quarry."

Bate gave me a demented grin; then, as if my words had roused him to some force for self-defence in the living world again, his eyes glared at me like those of a beast, his hands twitched as though he could not withhold a blow.

"You," he cried, "mind your business, or I'll—"

"Hand me over what you have left of Rob's money," said I, still even and low, "unless you want to serve out a sentence in prison. I've got to keep an eye on you hereafter, and I shan't fail to do it. It is 'toe-the-mark' or prison for you, Bate. And be quick about what I tell you to do. You don't want to get a crowd out here."

"It's a lie, Jim," said he, desperately; "somebody's been tellin' you a lie. Daisy got drunk as a fool, and fell over of his own accord. Tee-bo and me went over on business, and we can prove it; and we happened to see him stumblin' and reelin' along the quarryside, drunk; we said then he'd likely fall over. That's all we got to do with it."

"Rob Hilton saw the hand that dealt the blow," I informed him, rather impatiently. "And what if I, being an old stager, and knowing the ways of a few o' the folks—thank Heaven, there's only a few o' that sort 'round here—what if I arranged to have some of those bills marked that went into Rob's pocket, and that you've got now in your own?"