

Meantime, Aunt Haly had left the big road, and had climbed over the irregular fence at a certain panel, where a smooth, worn appearance of the rails bore witness to frequent passings at this point. She followed a weed-choked path through a neglected park, set here and there with pedestals, which had upheld stone goddesses and ornamental figures in the old days of plantation affluence; and through the gray moss that shrouded the oaks she could see the Ionic columns of a forlorn mansion, long since given over to the tenancy of bats and owls. Further away, beyond the old "quarter" play-ground, lay the little cemetery, and as Aunt Haly drew near, a startled rabbit ran from the sassafias bushes right across her path. Now, as a graveyard rabbit is universally deemed a "hant," whose mere passing entails bad luck, Aunt Haly, to avert the ill, hastily marked a cross upon the ground and spat upon its center. But when she lifted her glance toward the graves, a cry of terror escaped her at the sight of a tall, silent figure with folded arms and pensively drooped head.

"Jesus alive!" exclaimed she, "de very spit en image of ole Marster, dem little curls layin' round de aiger de naik, de Carter favor, en all. Good Gawd ermighty!"

Then, noticing that the supposed "spirit" wore a modern tweed suit instead of the traditional ghostly habiliment of a winding sheet, and, moreover, presented a kindly cast of countenance, the old woman mustered up courage to demand, "Who dat?" whereupon the stranger turned, and the former nurse recognized "ole marster's" only son, who had run away from home in his youth and had since been accounted as one dead.

"O—miss' baby chile—mammy little boy! Thank Gawd for dis, I done laid my eyes on his dear face once mo'," cried she, dropping the wreaths to throw her loving arms around the stalwart frame that she had guarded so tenderly through its helpless infancy.

"So you are not dead, after all, mammy?" said this dignified gentleman, Mr. Brook Carter, affectionately stroking Aunt Haly's shoulder. "They told me all the old negroes had either died or moved away."

"They did, honey," she answered. "You see, miss' wuz dead, en look like marse tucken gin up attar you runned away to prodjick longer machines, stiddier bein' a gentleman like yo' foresesters wuz befo' you, es marse would have it. Attar he died de plantation pass to other hands, den freedom come, en de niggers got toled off fast wid one fool tale en den ernuthar. Er whole passel on us tucken migrashe to Arkansy, whar de noration gin out dat dey wuz forty acre er land en a mule, layin' round loose fer eny nigger dat come along. Shoo, chile, studdier dat, dey wa'n't skacely vittles to go round, so me en Primus tucken scuffled back home."

Then Mr. Carter was told about the tiny portion of the old plantation that the pair had bought "on time," about the legacy of orphaned grandchildren, and about the crop failures and the steady pursuit of ill-luck, now about to culminate. "Hit do 'pear like de debil got a grudge 'ginst us," Aunt Haly went on, "for us is in a tight, sho'—no money, nuthin to eat, en dat moggige whut gwine sell us out!" At this lamentable thought the old creature threw her apron over her head and wept bitterly.

"There, there, mammy," said Mr. Carter, kindly, "don't cry, don't cry. I can help you easily. I have been successful beyond my hopes; my last invention brought me more than the old plantation is worth under these changed conditions. Yet I believe even poor father would acknowledge I am still a gentleman. I had intended to engage a care-taker for these graves, but as you have tended them so well without recompense, let me in return pay for your little farm, and add another strip to include this old graveyard and at the same time give you greater field room. I shall see to the taxes, and if ever you are in trouble, mammy, send to me at this address." With these words the speaker gave Aunt Haly his card.

"Oh, and that reminds me," he went on, suddenly remembering the season. "This is Christmas; here, take this money and give yourself and the youngsters a feast like those of other days."

Aunt Haly, overwhelmed with the munificence of a sum greater than any she had ever owned, showered blessings upon the giver's head, and when he had mounted his horse and ridden away, she fell upon her knees and uttered a prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord, who, as the colored Christian believes, interests himself in the trivial details of daily life as much as in greater things.

Daylight was quite gone when the good old soul returned to the cabin, and through the darkness a wide band of ruddy firelight streamed from the open doorway, where Unger Primus sat, patiently waiting.

"Wull, wife," he drawled, "you wuz so long er comin' dat I giv de chill-n dey hoe cake en sont em to bed. I didn' had de heart to turn em from hangin' dey stockings for de Sandy Claws whar ain' gwine git here," and the speaker pointed to an array of coarse and much-mended hosiery.

"Shuh, babe," cautioned Aunt Haly, using her superlative term of endearment, "don' make no fuss to wake 'em. Us got to go to town dis night!"

Then she poured into her astonished husband's ears the tidings of good fortune. Forthwith he harnessed the pony, while Aunt Haly banked the fire and locked the sleeping children in the house, as is the unwise custom in negro families when the elders leave home at night; and the old couple hastened to town, building en route modest air-castles upon the foundation

of their unexpected wealth. In their comfortable imaginations, Dame Partlet's busy brood already enlivened the bleak back-yard, several spotted "razor-backs" grunted in the hog-sty, and there was a brindle cow, which the children would drive up of an evening, with a mellow tinkle of the bell accompanying Bud Chug's far-sounding plantation yodel. Nay, even a sturdy mule seemed not an impossibility!

The stores were still crowded with shoppers when the two reached town, and though everybody seemed in the greatest hurry conceivable, sovereign good humor prevailed, and a delightful air of mingled mystery, holiday preparation and excitement enwrapped the whole community. Tempting smells of hot doughnuts, spice-cakes, ginger loaves and "kitchen" candies stole out from the confectioner's, and from the toy shop issued the tinkling tunes of a music-box, much to the joy of numerous little darkies who were pressing their queer, flat noses flatter still against the window panes. Within most of the shop windows sat, jolly figures of the Christmas saint presided, even the shoe shop exhibiting a rotund *payer maché* Santa Claus, who stood under a sparkling Christmas tree loaded with gifts that were to be bestowed gratis upon all purchasers of children's shoes.

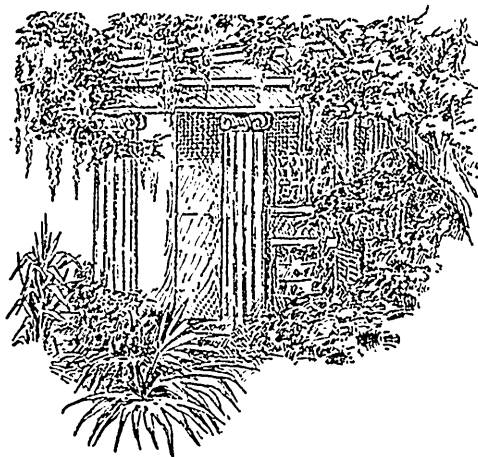
Aunt Haly and Unger Primus enjoyed it all as they passed from store to store and gayly chaffered with friends as belated as themselves; and finally the homeward journey was begun. As luck, whether good or ill, seldom comes singly, it is not surprising that when Unger Primus stopped in the swamp to examine his game trap, he found therein a fine raccoon, "des natchelly bustin' wid fatness." A proper dressing of this animal, in addition to other preparations for the morrow, detained the old couple until so late an hour that, when they at last retired, the midnight chimes of St. Paul's had already pealed joyously in the distant town, and the "watch-meetings" of the colored societies had ended with prayer and Christmas song.

Next morning, long before the lazy Winter sun had thought of bestirring himself, Patsy awakened and, jerking the close-wrapped quilt from about her head, sprang up crying excitedly, "Chris'mus gif, Chris'mus gif, chillen!"

"Chris'mus gif, yo'se'f," screamed the other three, aroused immediately.

"Lawd-e-e!" exclaimed Palmyre, making a dash for the bulging stockings, about the filling of which she had had her doubts, it may be. "Sandy Claws ain' forgot we all, sho' 'nuff!"

"Whoo-ee! Uh-m!" clamored the eager little crowd, scrambling over one another to reach the fire-place; and then the tiny room resounded with a perfect hubbub of bliss, as each long-desired, prayed-for treasure came to light.



A FORLORN MANSION.



BUD CHUG.