

his eye fell on something—a thing shivering against a boulder in the unfenced lot across the way. It was a small creature. Its bright eye looked out with the primitive questioning of woodland denizens. Its every hair stood on end. Its sharp, twitching nose expressed the painful shyness of wild things brought suddenly to confront civilization. It was—Pete could scarcely believe his eyes—it was—a possum!

Since many years sight of that delight of the darkey had not gladdened Pete's eyes. The old negro looked with an eager questioning at the small creature, which returned his look in kind.

"I wonder," queried Pete in a very anxiety of desire, "ef you is a sho' nough possum. Ef you ain't you look mighty lak you is."

The opossum twitched his nose closer to earth.

"You actin' shame' lak a 'possum, too. But den I dunno. Dis heah New York hit's a cu'us place for folks and critters," Pete soliloquized, as he gazed across at the coveted creature. "I made me fifty cents once movin' boxes full of animals at dat Hippydrum (and dey beats de drum dar too). But I ain't wait to get dat fifty cents, 'caze time I get done my job and was dodgin' 'bout 'caze of so many animals and cur'us critters, dar come up on me, right on me, a lion. And dat lion he speak to me as nachel as a man. Nothin' ain't skeer me since den, not much. Sez dat lion, sez he, 'Hello, old man.' Sez I, sorter sidesteppin', 'caze a lion is a lion any way yer face him and any way yer place him—sez I, 'Mighty well, Bre'r Lion, mighty well, but some bony, long of low feedin'.' Den dat lion he sat right down on his behin' legs, he did, and put his head in his befo' paws and laughed, he did, des same as a nachel man. Sez dat lion, sez he, 'Come back, ole man.' Sez I, 'Bre'r Lion, my job's done now and my folks 'spectin' me home' (de which I ain't got no folks and no home, but I don't sasso den). Sez I, 'Far'well, Bre'r Lion, I wish you mighty well. I hopes your constitution expositulates suffocatingly, and I hopes your folks ekally healthable,' sez I, and I pulls my forelock to dat lion same as he was white folks. Dat lion he sez, 'Heah come my folks now.' Bless de gracious! I look, and heah come some several forty-leven lions, mos' ob 'em walking on dey behin' legs, too. Den I never tarried no mo'. I was clean gone 'fo' you could say de name er Jock Robinson, and de las' look back I tuck dat lion yet sittin' dar on his behin' legs laughin' 'fo' to kill."

At the sound of Pete's voice purring along in monologue, the opossum covered closer to the rock in overwhelming shyness. Pete looked at it in increasing desire.

"Honey," he ejaculated, "you look lonesome, and I feels lonesome." With that he crept across, holding the opossum's eye with his, and murmuring: "You look mighty lak a possum. You gittin' shameder and shameder. 'Shame' to run, 'shame' to walk. Dar! He gone ter laughin' lak rale ole Bre'r Possum. Huh—dar. I got him! Heah you is now quilled up in a knot, yo' teef grin'nin' now, and yo sides shakin' laughin'.

Maybe perhaps he gwine speak now lak dat lion. Fat! So fat! Good thing I got dis cyarpet-sack. He ain't spoke yet. But den he mought. Sah, Bre'r Possum, 'scuse me, sah, but I hat'ter put you in dis bag. I kin tote you better dat way. He ain't say nothin' yet, but dat ain't no sign he ain't gwine to."

Pete's prize was heavy, and he knew, even though his feet were inured to long distances, that he could not afoot reach the lower part of the city with the burden. Seated on the car, schemes began to revolve in his brain. He held a prize he deemed priceless. Yet it had a price. At last he held something of real cash value. If he could sell it! If he could eat it!

The poor, half starved negro's mouth watered as he felt the lucious fatness trembling under his arm.

Yet if he could sell it for five dollars, if he could find another — his brain whirled with the thought — he might, after all, get the coveted fifteen dollars which would put his old mistress again on Virginia soil.

Once there she might send for him, and there were grandchildren there—boys to be taught to fish and swim and hunt. He would find a purchaser for

his treasure, and make a beginning toward those delectable possibilities.

The old darkey rode even to Wall Street, revolving these projects in his mind.

Walking up that narrow way, where every building sheltered the equivalent of many millions, the old man was sick at heart for just three five-dollar bills which would bring life and happiness to another. But he was cheered somewhat as he felt the weight of his precious burden. Where the crowd was thin Pete stopped. "I b'leeve I des look at him." Suiting the action to the word, he carefully opened the bag and peeped in. "Dar, done drop laughin' ag'in."

"A possum!" exclaimed a voice at his ear—a soft Southern voice. The voice betrayed the delight that the young Southern lawyer felt at finding an opossum on Wall Street. He was just arranging to entertain a party of friends at his apartment on Christmas Eve, and this opossum was the very thing to give the perfecting touch to his preparations. Five dollars? Good. The old negro had a good face. He was surely trustworthy. Here was the address. These directions to the negro cook, whom Pete would find in the apartments. Here was five dollars; here car-fare.

With five dollars in pocket and the opossum still in the bag, Pete turned back to Broadway.

Could mortal man have resisted such temptation? Pete came into Broadway near where he knew was the office of a Southerner noted for his wealth, good fellowship, and hospitality. Why not make another five—and now?

Entrance to the office was gained. Who could refuse admittance to a negro and a possum with tomorrow Christmas Eve!

The trade was made, but no five dollars was immediately forthcoming. Pete must go to the home of the purchaser, deliver the opossum and a note which would bring the price.

When Pete reached the house, the afternoon sun glittered on the well-appointed equipage into which the Good Fellow's wife was stepping.

How she laughed when she saw the old darkey and his possum!

James must go in for the maid to come for special directions to the cook concerning the keeping of Bre'r Possum till his death hour. Here the five dollars.

She was about to drive on when the decrepit appearance of the old negro attracted her attention. Probably, she thought, he was selling for another, and but little or none of the price came home to him.

"Stop! here, old man," she called, "here's lagniappe. You know what that is?"

"La, yas, mistis; thanky, ma'am," shutting his hand over the coin.

In another instant the equipage had whirled around the corner and was lost in the concourse of vehicles on Fifth Avenue.

In that instant Pete was scheming again. With a businesslike jerk he shouldered his bag with the opossum in it and started past the house, going westward.

"Come, stop! rascals! Bring ce-ce-bete-la! Police, I will call!" cried the maid.

"Ma'am," Pete bowed very low, "butcher, ma'am. Madam she say, when she call me to de kerridge, lak you see she do, ma'am, she tell me, 'Take him to de butcher; when he kilt and clean bring him fer to put on ice!' With this he opened his palm and showed the extra coin presumably given for the extra task.

"Oh! oui, oui," consented the maid, mollified by so many respectful salaams and ma'ams.

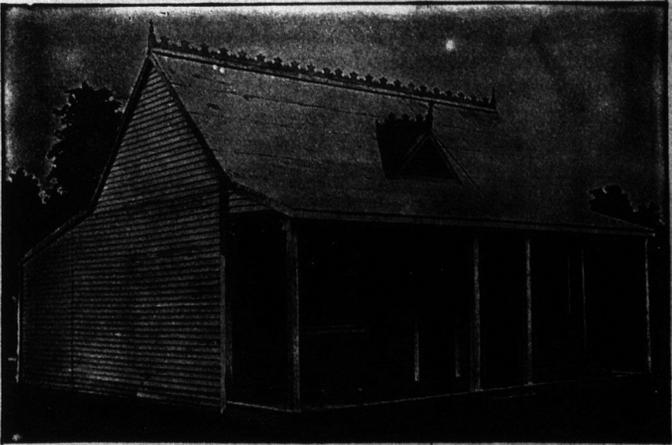
Hurrying west, Pete sped down Broadway to Times Square, where he offered his opossum to the proprietor of one of the several restaurants thereabout. The five dollars came readily, and this time Pete was left with empty bag.

A policeman who, with the gathering crowd, looked at the little animal, expressed the opinion that the creature had escaped or been stolen from the Bronx Zoo; it was best not to kill it until inquiries were made and satisfactorily answered.

Pete, with the cunning and dexterity of his race, had slipped away, and was already speeding toward the Old Dominion wharf.

Before the ticket window there he

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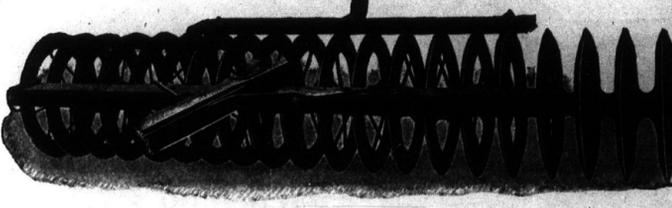
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