

A TALE OF THE  
SOUTHLAND

## JACK

HELEN F.  
KENDRICKOF HALF A  
CENTURY AGO

I NEVER knew his last name; but that does not matter. I knew him in the South, his native home and mine. Anyone meeting him in the street would have said: "What a shambling, honest, good-natured darkey boy!" He came one morning to our house and rang the front door-bell, as was the habit of darkey boys. I had seen him come lazily up the walk, and, without waiting for a servant, I went to the door to ask his business. When I opened the door I was greeted with: "Good-mornin', Niss.\* Do you wanta hire?"

Now I did not "wanta hire" when I went to the door; but I glanced at the honesty and rags on this uncouth figure and I was not quite sure of not wishing to hire.

"What can you do?" I asked.

"I dunno ez I kin do nuthin'." I never has; but Granny sez I got ter git er place. Granny's dun tuck down now, en she sez me en Lucy has ter help 'er."

"Who is Granny?"

"She's er old 'oman 'ez brung me up, en she's mighty good ter me en Lucy, 'cep w'en I sleeps out. Den she licks me."

I smiled and asked him his name.

"Jack, ma'am."

"Well, Jack," I said, "You may come back at one o'clock, or you may wait in the kitchen. Father will be at home then. He will talk with you and perhaps he will 'hire'." I think Jack fancied he might find a friendly cook and something to eat in the kitchen; for he shuffled around the house to that quarter after I had closed the door. My father wanted good servants, and this boy was very ragged and ignorant; but I think father saw his honesty and good will, and these must have been his recommendations. At any rate, Jack was installed as errand boy in our family, and on Sunday he visited Granny and Lucy in a new suit of clothes, new shoes, and hat. He was very proud when he started off so fine a gentleman, and he was prouder still when he returned, and said to cook: "Yer des oughter seed de w'ites er Granny's eyes w'en I crope in norter still en ax her: 'Howdy.' En Lucy she des ax her holler."

I was one of seven children. We had a happy home and knew nothing of sorrow until this very year, when Jack came among us. There was one spot in our dear household where suffering and sorrow had entered, one room where footsteps were lighter, and where no feeling but tenderness could have place. This was the sick-room of my mother. It was not long before Jack had found his way into this room, and its influence took hold upon him. We never knew how or when he went in, or what words of introduction passed between him and my mother, but on the third Sunday of his stay among us, I heard Jack say, in the kitchen, to the nurse who tended mother, that he had "er bundle er rags fer Granny, en suthin' fer Lucy, too." Nurse asked what the rags were for and where he got them.

"How'd I know w'at dey fer? All I know is dat Niss Em'ly dun gin 'em ter me, tied up, en tole me ter take 'em ter Granny. I think mebbe she w'd'n't member 'bout Lucy, so I tuck'n bot a popo'n'

ball fer her. I dun et some uv it; an' it's preshus good, too. Look-er-yere."

"Jack," asked, nurse, "who is Lucy?"

"She's er gal."

"To be sho'; but is she yo' sister?"

"I dunno. All I know is dat she lives w'id Granny."

"Do you like 'er?"

"I dunno; on'y she uster blab on me w'en I hid out nights."

"But, Jack, why did yer hid out nights?"

"Oh, dem 'uz days w'en me en de udder boys went er pickin' berries in de del's; den we 'ud get sleepy out dar, en nex' thing we knowd it 'uz day. Udder days we kotch pat'ldges in de bushes, en den sometimes it 'uz er 'possum. But ev'y time I dun it Granny lick' me. But I must be gettin' along, Granny'll be wantin' dese rags, en Niss Em'ly sh'e."

Here he stopped and shuffled out of the

"I—knowed—whar dey us—afore. Dey us in er big yard er 'Ridin' roun' en I seed two uv de nutties, so I des fetch 'em w'id dis" (showing a flip) "kaze I know'd Niss Em'ly like 'em fer break-fus."

"Oh, Jack! How bad you have been!"

was my reproachful answer.

He hung his head, but said doggedly:

"Niss Em'ly's sick; en she like 'em."

"Yes; but we can buy them for her!"

I said.

"No, ma'am; I can't, 'kaze I has ter give all de money I gets ter Granny."

I turned away, rather impatiently.

He lingered a moment, then said:

"Niss Hennie, would you des il've gimme back de pidjins ag'in?"

"Yes," I said, "What for?"

"'Kaze, mebbe, ef I tuck 'em ter Niss Em'ly en tole er all 'bout it she mought-n't think I tuck no harm en w'at I dun."

I turned quickly to go downstairs, and I followed to see what he would do. He went down without noise, and passed through the hall to mother's room. There he stopped. The door was a little open, and the black head went into the opening before the figure moved. Then I lost sight of him. He had gone in. I heard no sound, and while I waited for Jack to come out, I remembered that when he came home from Granny's he wore creaking shoes; but when he passed mother's door on the way up-stairs he was barefooted. Presently the little black figure slipped out of the quiet room, and had left its peace unbroken. I descended the stairs and went in. Mother was asleep. Jack had laid the pigeons on the bed at her feet. The last rays of the sun fell across the foot of the bed, tinting with light and color the soft plumage of the birds.

It was early fall when my father hired Jack, and the winter months were not slow in coming; for in Middle Georgia we had cold weather when the season for it came. That winter was a time of unusual suffering for mother, and of anxious watching for all our family.

Just after the frosts had come, and the fires were lighted each day in the grate, we were surprised one evening by the sound of music in some distant part of the house. We were sitting in mother's room, and for quite a while we could not tell what kind of music it was, or where it came from. Tum, tum, tum, the sound was repeated without any regular time; but it came unceasingly. My sister, Ida, started with me to find the meaning of the sounds. We searched the sitting-room, parlor and bedrooms; and when we reached the front spare-room upstairs, there it was. Jack had found the kitchen too noisy, so he had lighted a fire in our best bedroom, and was enjoying his old banjo all alone. We had not known before that he was musical, and the sight and the sounds were so comical that we almost dragged the poor boy downstairs, banjo and all, to mother's room.

We asked him to sing; but he only grinned until mother spoke: "Come, Jack, sing for me. It will take me back to the time when I was a child."



kitchen into the street. The "rags" proved to be some garments for Granny brought from the attic trunks by nurse at mother's order.

At sunset that day I was sitting alone on the broad, upper veranda of our house. After a little I saw Jack come awkwardly down the street, elate with something he was trying to keep all to himself. He passed through the gate into the back-yard and I thought nothing more of it. Presently light steps approached me, and I heard these words very softly spoken: "Niss Hennie, here is two pidjins fer Niss Em'ly." There was Jack holding out to me two newly-killed pigeons.

"Oh, Jack," I answered. "How nice! Did Granny send them?"

"No, ma'am," he said, emphatically. "I brung 'em fer Niss Em'ly, en fer nobody else."

"But where did you get them?" I asked, suspecting more than one sin against the Sabbath day.

I think he detected something of this in my voice; for he answered rather timidly:

\*The use of the letter n for m in such words as Niss and morning was a peculiarity of Jack's which we could not correct, and Niss Em'ly was the name he gave my mother.