

to alertness. Mr. Rucker carolled, in a robust voice:

"Last night, in my late rambles,
All in the vale of Skye,
I met a lovely creature
All in the mountains high."

But the only lovely creature we met was the lady moon, queen of this wild world of wood and mountain and stream, now almost out of sight, as day was beginning to dawn. The hills, near and far, rose like waking giants to meet the pale, blinking stars; lights twinkled from the valley below; little piping birds mingled their shrill notes with the sound of the wood-chopper's axe.

We rode at a brisk trot, Mr. Rucker and I in the rear. Suddenly a cry was heard from one of the advance-guard. I pressed forward, my mind's eye filled with a fine buck, who sniffed the "tainted gale," and sprang with beautiful fear from his pursuers. Instead of which I saw a figure on two legs—but

"Whether man or woman,
Whether ghoul or human."

I could not tell at the distance—spring across the field as if Satan's fiends were after him.

From this time all is confusion in my memory. Wild, wild riding I recall, and a sense of reckless delight that vented itself in shrill cries to my horse. The sun was just darting up in slim scarlet lances. A light wind blew, and the very drops of blood in my veins seemed to dance like the pine needles in the wind. What we pursued I no longer knew. I was beside myself with the passion of the chase. Logs, bogs, nor brooks appalled me. Fences and gullies were as shadows leaped over in a dream. The infernal baying of the hounds was music to my ear. Noble sport this, truly. Now and then there was a glimpse of a flying figure—a male Atalanta bounding over the ground with splendid speed; and finally a sudden pull-up—a something at bay—and a sound of rifles snapping and hounds yelping.

"Fire, lad, fire!" cried Mr. Rucker.

"For God's sake tell me—is it a man?"

"Fire in the air if you have any doubt," he said, with a great laugh, and firing his own rifle at a tree-top. Wild with excitement, I essayed to do the same. My horse plunged—my gun went off—an awful cry followed the report, and a voice shrieked: "He has killed him! He has shot Bud Kane!"

I leaped from my horse and rushed to the spot. There, truly, lay a man—a muscular, finely-shaped young negro, entirely nude but for a fox-skin thrown over his shoulders. He was panting heavily, and his blood was staining the yellow sedge-grass.

I could not believe my eyes. I was almost distracted. Had I done this horrible deed! Had I slain an inoffensive fellow-creature, whose hands were certainly clean toward me, no matter how many Sarsar hogs he had stolen! Innocent I felt myself, yet guilty with a horrible guiltiness; for there lay the poor wretch, bleeding like Marco Bozzaris, and not a man among them all spoke a word of comfort.

111.

A litter was made of the boughs of pine-trees, and Bud Kane lifted upon it. Mr. Rucker and I rode in advance of the bearers, to prepare Bud's mother for the reception of her son.

"Man alive!" cried Andy, impatiently, "why did you not fire in the air? Did you not see we were all doing so?"

"I saw nothing. Why did you lead me into such a devil's business?"

"My dear Merewether," in a cool, dry tone, "like Shakespeare's Jew, you bettered my instruction."

At the door of a particularly mean-looking cabin Mr. Rucker called a halt. A veritable hag sat in the doorway—old, black, lean, and wrinkled, but with a head of crisped wool as bushy as a box plant. This person was engaged in the curious operation of "roping" her hair, that is, dividing it into small strands, each one of which was wrapped tightly to its end with a white cotton string.

"Hello, Aunt Diana!" said Mr. Rucker.

"Why, Mars' Andy!" Dat you? What brings you here dis hour in de mornin'? Want a drink o' buttermilk?"

"No; I've some bad news for you. Bud has met with an accident."

"What's dat you tell me?"

She sprang to her feet. Anything more uncanny and witch-like than her appearance can not be imagined. On one side of her head her hair stood out like an electrified mane, evidently fresh from a vigorous carding; on the other it lay flat in little snaky cotton twists. Her eyes rolled till they seemed all white. One hand was on her hip, the other stretched toward us with clinched fist.

Mr. Rucker ran over the details of the accident without mentioning my name. But she pinned me on the spot.

"I s'pose you did it," she said, "seein' as you are a stranger! Der ain't none o' de boys here would a been so clumsy."

"Yes, my horse reared, and my gun went off accidentally. I am very sorry."

"Sorrow don't butter no corn-pone," she interrupted, in a high key. "I mistrust-wal sompen wrong yesterday when Mars' Andy Rucker wuz here persuadin' Bud ter take part in his onmannerly, onchristian rampage."

"What!" cried I, in a passion in my turn; "it was a sell, then, after all!"

Mr. Rucker smiled, and shrugged his shoulders.

"You wouldn't 'a thought so," screamed Mother Kane, "if you had 'a heerd him beggin' Bud an' bribin' him to take de job. Bud warn't noways anxious to dress hisself up in a fox-skin an' go tarin' over de country, an' let de hounds be turned loose on him. But says Mars' Andy: 'We will post horses in de thickets, so that you can ride from point to anudder, an' save your strength to dash across de open fields an' keep ahead o' de hunt. An' it will be a big frolic, Bud,' he says; 'an' when it's done you shall have a quart o' rum an' five dollars fur de night's work.' Five dollars looked big enough to cover de sun an' moon, it did. So he kin his consent, an' here's de end of it—Bud killed, an' me left ter scuffle along, de heavenly powers knows how."

She threw her apron over her head and began to weep.

"I knowed mischief wuz comin'," she sobbed. "Twarn't on'y las' week dat ole Debby, de witch 'ooman, tole my fortune on de shoulder-blade of a sheep, an' likewise de breas'-bone of a goose. 'Troubles lak an' many,' she says, 'an' a funeral in de house, an' a hard row ter hoe!' An' I jis tell you, young man—droppin' her apron, and shaking her extraordinary old head at me—"I'll have de law of you. Dis ain't nuthin' short of murder, it ain't."

"It was an accident," I cried; and whatever I can do to make amends, you may be sure I will do."

"Den you kin jist han' me over some money fur de funeral expenses an' odder matters."

"How much do you want?"

"Jes' put it to yourself, sir. Don't you think if you wuz tore away from your pa, an' his ole age left widout support, he would ax a purty high figger to cover de loss?"

"I think," said I, with much internal bitterness, "if my father could see me at this moment, he would think twenty-five dollars a high value for my head."

"Well, gimme dat, marster, an' I'll be satisfied."

I handed her the sum, and we left the house just as the men bearing Bud on the litter came in sight, and the old mother began her distracting screams.

"Rucker," said I, as we rode away—"Rucker"—and my voice trembled with rage—"as I am a living man you shall give me satisfaction for this."

"Let a harmless jist go by," he said, coldly, "and consider your own position. I am bound to tell you that you are in some danger. The negroes here are a wild lot, and, backed by certain lawless white men I could mention, would jist as soon lynch you as not."

"That I own would be quite in keeping with what I have seen of the Gentlemen of Sarsar."

"We will discuss the matter farther when you are rested; you look fagged out," said Mr. Rucker, with an air of paternal interest.

At the widow Joplin's I shut myself into my room, and throwing myself on my bed, fell into as profound a sleep as if to shoot a man before breakfast was nothing more serious than to bag a lot of birds.

Toward noon Mr. Rucker came back. His face was drawn into solemn lines, his ringlets hung damp and uncured.

"Kane is dead," he said.

"No!"

"The wound seemed a trifle at first; but traumatic tetanus set in, and he went off like a shot."

"I would give my right hand to undo this morning's work."

"Come, man, don't be cast down. My advice is that you come with me at once to a magistrate and give yourself up. I will go bail for your appearance at the April court. I need not ask if you will be sure to be on hand?"

"If I allow you to be my bondsman, such a question is an insult," said I, haughtily.

"Exactly. I will go your bail for, say, two thousand dollars. And since this sum, like the rod of Aaron, swallows up the smaller amount you came to collect, we will let that matter rest over until you come on to your trial—eh?"

"I am in your hands, Mr. Rucker," said I, fiercely, and feeling like a rat in a trap, "and have no alternative but to do as you suggest. But my father will be here as my legal adviser, and I can tell you this whole thing will be well sifted."

"Your father may count on my aid and friendship," said Mr. Rucker, with the air of a generous potentate, "both for his sake and yours."

As he spoke there was a rap at the door, and a trim mulatto girl answered to my "Come in." There was a gypsy beauty in her bold black eyes, and mischief lurked in the corners of her mouth; but she made a tolerably modest courtesy, and said:

"If you please, sir, I wuz gwine ter be married."

"That is not surprising," said Mr. Rucker, seeing me at a loss how to reply to this unexpected confidence. "I should think all the young bucks in the country would be after you."

"I ain't gwine ter boast o' dat, Mars' Andy, for you knows I never was one o' dem flirts, owddacious gals dat would jist as soon sleep in de calaboose as anywhar else. But I wuz gwine ter marry decent an' respectable as any white lady, an' have a gold ring an' pillar-shams. An' now he's gone an' got killed, and I ain't got nobody ter marry; and I jes' wish I was dead too."

Here she began to weep, and with a pang at the heart, I realized that before me stood another victim of my fatal shot. It was Bud Kane whom she was to marry!

It was Bud Kane whom she was to marry!

"My poor girl—" said I.

"Don't you 'poor girl' me!" she cried, viciously. "I'm jist as free as anybody, and I don't want no foolin' nor soft talk from you nor no other white gentleman."

"Well, what do you want?" said I, roughly.

"My circumstances is these," she said, checking her tears "that I have give up a good place I had at five dollars a month, an' have spent all my savin's an' givin's a-buyin' weddin' clothes an' a feather-bed, which I am meanin' to swap off to the widder Joplin for the tombstone of her fust husband, an' set it up over poor Bud, the verses on it bein' ekally appropriate, as they only says:

"He wuz too bright fur earth,
He wuz taken from our hearth.
Of angels ther wuz a dearth,
So they welcomed him with mirth."

"That is a fine idea of yours," said Mr. Rucker, "but you wander from the point."

"No, sir, I'm jes' a-comin' to it. Seein' as I am all throwed out an' disadvantage, I thought if I had ten or twelve dollars I could go to town, an' git a place an' earn my livin'; an' it looked like de gentleman dat shot Bud ough ter help me along a little to kerry out my projec's an' git de better o'my afflictions."

My hand was in my pocket. I pulled it out, holding a bill, and bade good-by to Bud Kane's interesting sweetheart.

"You did well," said Mr. Rucker; "a policy of conciliation now, by all means."

On reaching the inn I found myself awaited at the door of my room by an imposing-looking old darkey with white hair and a stout cane.

"Good-day, sir," said he. "If your name is young Mr. Merewether, I would like a few words wid you."

"All right, uncle; come in." And I threw open the door and flung myself into a chair.

"Give me de satisfacshun to introduce myself," said the old man, with dignity, "as de parster of de Fust Methodist Church, limited."

"Limited to what?" said I, profanely.

"To de godly an' to de seekers; an' to dis latter class our departed brudder Bud Kane belonged. He wuz a seekin' sperrit."

"Bud Kane again!"

"Dat pore wild lad lost his life as so many of our color loses der manly sperret—by submittin' to de white folks as if dey wuz monkeys instid o' men. But, in despite of Bud bein' in some sort a son of Belial, he wanted ter do what wuz right; an' he hed agreed ter give us a small sum toward erectin' a edifice for prayer an' praise, de present meetin'-house bein' subject to rats, an' bats, an' rain, an' de bad boys of Sarsar."

"I really don't see how this matter concerns me!" cried I, though, alas! I did see with fatal clearness what he was after.

"I was thinkin', marster," he said severely, "dat it mought be a sort o' balm o' Gilead to your conscience to supply dat sum."

"Better give him a trifle," whispered Mr. Rucker; "he has great influence among the blacks."

There was no help for it. A five-dollar bill passed from my keeping into that of the "parster of the Fust Methodist Church, limited."

I began to pack my portmanteau.

"What are you about?" said Mr. Rucker.

"About to leave your town. I can catch the night train at L—by making good speed."

"So you can; but take my advice again and leave that luggage."

"Leave my portmanteau! But why?"

"You won't be allowed to get away. The people are keeping watch. I can manage it, however. Start out with me as if for a friendly ride, and we can get on to L— with nobody the wiser; but if you start out with that carpet-sack, I won't answer for the consequences. I can send it after you in a day or so."

Again I had to submit—anything to get out of the accursed place.

We mounted our horses, Mr. Rucker ostentatiously remarking that we were going out for a little ride.

"You won't let him get away, Mars' Andy?" cried a voice.

"Have no fear, boys; he is in Andy Rucker's charge," exclaimed another.

Once away from them I thought my trials at an end. But there were yet other ordeals in store. From a cabin a shade more dingy than Mother Kane's there rushed out a fat black female, with three or four children hanging to her skirts.

"Stop, stop, gentlemen!" she cried; and we reined in accordingly. She laid her hand on the bridle of my horse.

"Ain't you de gentleman dat killed Bud Kane?" she asked.

Bud Kane's name was fast becoming the red tag to the bull.

"What's that to you?" roared I.

"Jes' this, sir: these is Bud's chillern."

"I wonder if there is anything or anybody in this town that Bud Kane is not in some way connected with?" said I, violently. "I suppose you want a little money to buy a black frock?"

"I ain't pertickeler ez ter de frock, but I need de money powerful bad to help raise de chillern, for Bud always wuz mighty fond of 'em;" and she too began to weep. "He always said he meant ter have Julius Caesar eddicated. He wuz de favorite, because he wuz de oldest, an' de fust chile ebber had. Den he made a gret pet o' Leonidas, because he wuz de young-

est, an' prized accordin'; and de gal, Mary Margaret—"

"Why, look here," said I; "I have just seen a girl who told me she was going to marry Bud."

"Yes, sir, he tole me he wuz gwine ter marry. He wanted me to have him, but lor! I wouldn't marry Bud, because he didn't belong to de church."

I looked at Mr. Rucker. A grin convulsed his features. There was nothing to be said. I gave some money to the worthy matron, and we rode on.

At last we were well out of Sarsar, and my spirits began to rise. Suddenly we heard the clatter of a horse's hoofs coming after us at a rapid gallop.

"We are pursued," said Mr. Rucker.

"Let me give him a run for it," I cried.

"No, no; wait here; guilt flies; you risk nothing in facing whomever it may be."

The pursuer turned out to be a lean little man, who introduced himself as Dr. Mellar.

"I heard you were about leaving town, Mr. Merryfield," he said, briskly—"Merewether?" excuse me—and I wanted to mention to you a little bill for attendance on the negro Bud Kane, his mother being unable to pay, and hearing you had a fine feeling of honor—"

I got down from my horse, squared my elbows, doubled my fists. "Come on!" said I.

"Are you mad?" cried the little doctor; and wheeling his horse sharply round, he fled back to Sarsar.

Before I mounted again, I deliberately loaded my pistol.

"There is a seven-shooter," said I to Mr. Rucker. "One ball is for the undertaker, one for the grave-digger, the odd one for any of the mourners who may wish to be paid for weeping at Bud Kane's funeral."

"I think," cried Mr. Rucker, reeling slightly in his saddle, as if convulsed by some interlunatic emotion—"I really think we have seen the last of them. You may shake the dust from your feet, Mr. Merewether; you are out of Sarsar."

It was shortly before Christmas that this adventure befell me. Christmas day dawned brightly, as it seemed, to all the world but me. I had no heart to go to church, feeling in no mood for the jubilant services. I was alone in the house, and when there came a ring at the bell I answered the door. There stood a remarkably tall, lithe negro man, with my portmanteau in one hand, and in the other a little covered basket.

"Christmas gift, marster," he cried.

"Merry Christmas to you. You can get a glass of eggnog in the kitchen. I see you are from Sarsar. You have brought back my portmanteau."

"Yes, sir. Looks like you ought to know me by name, young master. You nearly shot my head off onst. Don't you remember Bud Kane?"

"Bud Kane?"

"Yes, sir, dat's me. Mars' Andy tole you I was dead; but dat wuz jist a joke o' his. Somebody axed him what made him act so hateful to you, an' he said onst there wuz two men standin' on de court-house steps, an' one o' 'em ups and knocks de odder off de steps; an' dey had him up fur 'salt an' battery. An' de judge say, 'What made you knock dat man off de steps? he wuz a stranger ter you, an' not a-doin' no harm.' An' de man says, 'I knows it, judge; I didn't have nothin' agin the fellow; but de truth is, he stood so fair I couldn't help it.'"

And Bud Kane chuckled as if I would be at no loss to apply his choice anecdote.

"Here's a note Mars' Andy sent you," he added.

I took the note, and read as follows:

"Dear Merewether,—I hope you don't bear malice. I know you will be glad that Bud Kane is not dead, and send this note by him to convince you of a fact. Of course the bail business was a farce. And I return the money you so handsomely shelled out to the various claimants."

"It is the season of forgiveness, so don't be backward about it. And in token of amity, accept the pups you admired—we call them Prince and Pauper—and give them to your sweetheart. Come again to Sarsar on a different errand, and I promise you a better welcome from rough old

"ANDY RUCKER."

"You take those pups back," said I, "and tell Mr. Rucker I will accept nothing at his hands."

"Yes, sir," said Bud, with a look of drollery; "but can't I have my eggnog befo' I start back? Christmas-time, you know, marster."

"Oh yes, have all the eggnog you want; and when you are ready to go, come to me for a note I shall send to Mr. Rucker."

While I brooded over the matter the pups got out of the basket, and began to frisk about the room. Then who should come in but Angie, rosy and beautiful, on her way home from church. Down she went on her knees before the little beauties in black and tan; and then she went into such raptures over them, and kissed them so many times, that I couldn't stand it, but offered her them and myself on the spot! She accepted the three of us, and the next thing I knew I had Angie, Prince and Pauper in my arms, and was pressing a first kiss on her smiling lips. Pauper happened to be somewhere between her heart and mine, and in consequence was so cruelly squeezed as to give a piercing howl; but it was a rapturous moment. I loved all the world, I blessed Andy Rucker, and I forgave the Gentlemen of Sarsar.