

THE LITTLE COMFORTER.

I have a little Comforter,
That climbs upon my knee,
And makes the world seem possible
When things go wrong with me.
She never is the one to say,
"If you had only been
More careful and more sensible,
This thing had been foreseen."
She blesses me,
Cares for me,
And whispers, "Never mind:
To-morrow night
All will be right.
My papa, good and kind."

To give me wise and good advice
I have of friends a score;
But then the trouble ever is,
I knew it all before.
And when one's heart is full of care,
One's plans all in a mess,
The wisest reasoning, I think,
Can't make the trouble less.
My Mamie's way
Is just to say,
"Oh, papa, don't be sad:
To-morrow night
All will be right.
And then we shall be glad."

Some think I have been much to blame:
Some say, "I told you so."
And others sigh, "What can't be helped
Must be endured, you know."
Of course, if trouble can be helped,
Then crying is in vain:
But when a wrong will not come right,
Why should I not complain?
In Mamie's eyes
I'm always wise:
She never thinks me wrong:
It's understood
I'm always good—
Good as the day is long.

All day I've kept a cheerful face,
All day been on the strain;
Now I may rest, or I may sigh,
Or, if I like, complain.
My daughter thinks as papa thinks,
And in her loving sight
I am a clever, prudent man,
Who has done all things right.
Faith so complete,
Oh, it is sweet:
When neither wise nor strong:
But love stands best
The better test
Of Sorrow and of Wrong.

Then come, my little Comforter,
And climb upon my knee;
You make the world seem possible
When things go wrong with me.
For you've the wisdom far beyond
The reach of any sage.
The loving, tender, hopeful trust,
That best can strengthen age,
Say, "Papa, dear,
Now don't you fear:
Before to-morrow night
The cares you dread
Will all have fled
And everything be right."

THE GENTLEMEN OF SARSAR

BY SHERWOOD BONNER.

I.

Sarsar! The very name of the place was sinister. Who does not remember De Quincey's "Sarsar wind of desolation," and the chill shuddering that quivered through the soul as the harsh adjective came blowing like a discord into the music of that incomparable writing?

Not a misgiving, however, crossed my heart when, shortly before Christmas, my father asked me if I thought myself possessed of the qualifications necessary for collecting a bad debt.

"The business of collecting, father," said I, with what malicious friends called my "prize-poem manner," "is odious in some of its features to a man of spirit, but it may bring into play some of the finest faculties of the human mind."

"And body," added my father, in a quiet sort of way.

"If courage is needed," said I, laughing, "I am the son of my State—the State that does not know how to surrender. As for my tact, civility, address, urbanity, and downright stubbornness, these desirable qualities are surely mine by right of inheritance."

"Well, well," said my father, meditatively, "it is a pretty rough place, Sarsar is. The debt is one thousand dollars; and if you get this sum, or any part of it, I don't mind saying it is yours for a Christmas-box."

For many reasons these were delightful words. First, while I fully intended that my life should teem with good things, at present it was as bare and empty as a sun-dried skull. My father, with the best intentions in the world, was so indifferent to the doctrines of Malthus as to become the parent of a perfect brood of young ones, each of whom had to stand on his own legs as soon as they were strong enough. I was at the beginning of my career, and made shift to get on, but such a sugar-plum as a thousand dollars had never dropped into my mouth. As befitted my slim purse, I was madly, unutterably in love—in love with Angie Bell, the prettiest girl, I would swear, among a million picked beauties. With the thousand dollars fairly mine, I should be able to offer her those delicate attentions man delights to lavish on the woman he adores—buggy drives and bonbons, new music, books, and bouquets. Thus I should weave myself, as it were, into her life, keep her little heart in a perpetual simmer of kindly feeling, and dispose her to look tenderly on my encroaching passion, nor resist when its tide should sweep her from her moorings into my arms. Unless, reflected I, it might be better to trust to winning her

solely on my merits, and, the betrothal an accomplished fact, spend all the sum in the purchase of a troth gift in some degree worthy of her inspiring beauty.

Absorbed in the pleasing perplexity of such a question, I was only aroused from my reverie by my father's tones, raised a good deal above their ordinary level.

"Yes, old Ruck is as saucy and rough a tonic as any man could swallow. You will need all your mother-wit in dealing with him. The old scamp swears it is not a just debt, and pay it he will not."

"Sarsar—nothing more than a backwoods settlement, is it?"

"Nothing. And there are people up among those hills who actually try to vote for General Jackson to-day! A good many worthless negroes have congregated in the place, who fight, quarrel, and steal without much interference from anybody. There are a lot of rough fellows, however, calling themselves 'the Gentlemen of Sarsar,' who regulate things after their own fashion. Chief among them is your man—Andy Rucker. He has unbounded influence with his clientele, and, they say, understands how to use the shot-gun better than any man in the country."

"Never think to daunt me, father," said I, briskly. "I shall go to Sarsar, and shall fetch back the money."

A few days later I got off at a station ten miles east of Sarsar, and, hiring a horse, set out for a ride across the country. The hills were steep, the road rough, the people rougher. At the cabins where I stopped to ask the way, they looked on me as a stranger from a far-off land.

"Do git down and look at your creetur," was their invariable remark, and one that puzzled me exceedingly, until I found it was a hospitable invitation to dismount for a rest.

Reaching Sarsar, I was directed to "the widow Joplin's" as a place of entertainment. The widow, a tired-looking woman, with her lips drawn down at the corners as if they needed kissing into shape, put me into the hands of a bright mulatto boy, whom she called Dee Jay. This worthy conducted me to my chamber, and asked if I would like some oysters for supper.

"Oysters, by all means—a couple of dozen, fancy roast."

"Lor', marster, we ain't got so many in de house; an' ef we had, I 'clar te gracious, marster, two dozen two-ponn' cans would kill you, sho'."

"Cans! Is it canned oysters you offered me?"

"Yes, sir—Cove. We had some fresh ones onst—I disremember what year it wuz. But, lor! we didn't know how ter open 'em, an' we jest pounded away at 'em wid brickbats, till Mars' Andy come an' showed us how. Ain't it curus how dey kin live an' breathe de breff o' life shet up in dem tight shells?"

Declining to enter into a discussion on oysters, I asked if Mars' Andy was Mr. Rucker.

"Yes, sir. Captain Rucker we mostly calls him. You acquainted wid him?"

"No; but to make his acquaintance happens to be my business here."

"Is dat so?" cried Dee Jay, with increased respect in his tones. "An' I made sho' you wuz a-drummin' for seggars. Mars' Andy ain't very fond o' dem drummin' men," he went on, confidentially; "in fac', dey ain't popular wid none o' dem lazy, long-legged Rucker boys. Dey kin fairly devil a stranger out o' town if dey takes a notion. Hope you ain't gwine ter tread on de captin's toes, marster. He's a awful man to have a rassel wid."

"He must be a terrible fellow," said I, laughing.

"Lor', dey ain't no harm in Mars' Andy. He's de head man in dis town. He's as full o' pranks an' capers as a unbroke colt; but he's got as much sense as a horse."

With that compliment, in every way worthy of a returned Gulliver, my innocent Yahoo took me to the widow Joplin's dining-room.

Before I had well finished my supper a tall man strode into the room, followed by two of the daintiest, prettiest little black-and-tan thorough-bred pups I had ever seen.

"How Angie would dote on them!" thought I.

The master of the pups was a noticeable man. Tall and broad-shouldered, with clean-cut features and bright black eyes—so far not differing from any other. But his hair marked him among men as Samson's among the Philistines. Long and heavy, and iron-gray in color, it fell in actual ringlets to his shoulders, and gave almost a look of ferocity to his countenance.

"A character!" said I to myself, and longed to hear him speak.

The wish was not allowed to grow cold, as he came directly to me with:

"I hear, sir, there is a stranger in town who wants to see Andy Rucker. That's my name. Yours is—"

"Ned Merewether, at your service," said I, rising, with extended hand. "You have met my father."

"Oh, Yes; I am well acquainted with Jack Merewether," he said, giving me a prolonged look. "Well, Ned, let's take a drink."

Knowing the offense I should give by a refusal, I assented, though dreading the villainous compound I should have to swallow under the name of "Old Bourbon."

One drink followed another, and my head began to buzz a little. Several men dropped in, who were introduced by Mr. Rucker as kinsmen and friends. I proposed a health to "the Gentlemen of Sarsar," and the scene grew convivial.

"What d'ye think of our country, mister?" said an ill-looking youth, whom they addressed by the tender title of "Honey Rucker."

"It's as fine a country as I ever saw," responded I. "But you don't have many rich men, I suppose?"

"Rich men!" cried Mr. Rucker, in a tone of compassion; "why, youngster, we are all rich, only we don't like to show off. Good families—like the Ruckers—never make a parade. Now and then such a fellow as Youell wants to spread himself. You remember, boys, how he went to old Nathan Weeks's funeral?"

"Rather!" said Honey Rucker, in a gloomy tone.

"It was a big funeral, and most of us walked, for carriages are unhandy on our roads. But Yowell wanted to make a show, so he and his must ride. He and his wife were in a four-wheeled gig, and every Jack and Gill of his seven children was toted by a likely negro boy, who sat astride a two-hundred-dollar mule. Now each one of those Africans would have sold for fifteen hundred dollars—aggregate, ten thousand five hundred dollars; the mules summed up to four-hundred dollars, making a clean sum of eleven thousand nine hundred dollars winding along these hills as unconcerned as a snake. What do you think of that for style?"

"Quite in the style of the 'Arabian Nights,'" said I.

"Better worth seeing than the aurora borealis," quoted Mr. Henry Rucker.

"Ah! there are some queer people up here among these hills," said Captain Andy, with a shake of the head.

"What do you do in the way of sport?" asked I.

"Everything—chase foxes, run deer, spear fish. But our grand sport"—with sudden animation—"our Christmas frolic, is a nigger hunt."

"A what?"

"A negro chase, perhaps you would call it. You see, our jail is such a ramshackle affair that it is next to impossible to keep a prisoner in bonds, if he has any get-up-and-get in his make-up. The rascals break out and take to the hills. And when the humor takes us we hunt them down."

There was a laughing devil in Mr. Rucker's eye, and I knew not what to think. Determined, however, not to seem unsophisticated, I said, coolly:

"I should think such game would give you but a short run."

"Humph! put twenty hounds on a black rascal's track—they can scent it after it's a day old—and he will run faster than a deer, and out-manoeuvre a fox in dodging corners."

"Poor souls!"

"They haven't any souls, I fancy," said Mr. Rucker, easily; "'poor bodies' would be more to the point, as they have to clip it to a galloping tune. Come, sir, no use walking on stilts away from home. Join us in our next hunt."

The man seemed as sober as a christened saint, but I felt I was the butt of a joke, and secretly resented it.

"Well, sir," said I, "I did not come here to make acquaintance with the sports of the gentry."

"And may I presume to ask why you *did* come?" inquired Mr. Rucker, with vast politeness.

"You should know best, sir, as I represent the firm of Avery & Merewether."

"Aha! I remember something was said of certain moneys that your people fancied I owed them."

"Fancy me no fancies, Mr. Rucker"—certainly the whiskey had gone into my head—"the money has to be paid."

"And are you the man that's to get it? Well, well, it would be a pity you should not have what you have come so far to gain—all, and more. I insist you should have more. I myself ought to make you a slight gift."

"Very well," I said, good-humoredly, "I will gladly accept these little beauties"—and I caught up Mr. Rucker's pups.

"For your sweetheart?"

"For the prettiest girl in the county," said I, laughing, and with a warm glow at my heart at the bare thought of my lovely little angel, Angie Bell.

II.

Awaking with a clear head the next morning, I hurried out to seek Mr. Rucker; but to my annoyance, that eccentric gentleman was nowhere to be found. Every one of whom I inquired was too stupid even to guess at his whereabouts.

"De captin is jes' like de sun," said my sympathizing valet, Dee Jay: "sometimes he will shine out on folks, an' agin, when de notion takes him, he will go under a cloud, an' you can't yut your finger on de place whar he is hid."

"And how long is it his Majesty's pleasure to stay under a cloud?"

"It 'ud take a wizard man to tell dat, marster."

"I went to his house, hoping to see some member of his family; but no one came to the door, though I rapped and pounded half an hour."

"He ain't got no family. De Rucker blood is purty nigh run out in dis county."

"Why, I thought every man in it was a Rucker."

"Well, dey is mostly cousins, or dey jes' tuk de name for glory. Mars' Andy had a lot of brothers onst, an' a par; but dey wuz killed, all along through de war—one a-buswhackin', one a-fightin' wid Morgan, one wid de fever, an' so on. Mars' Andy hisself had a squeak for his life onst on a time. He wuz lyin' on de field bleedin' from seventeen or eighteen wounds, when along comes a cavalryman a-singin' of his savior—"

"Dee Jay! what in the name of Heaven are you saying?"

"Along comes a cavalryman on a big black horse, a-singin' his savior in de air till it looked as round as a cart wheel, an' flashed like de moon on fire. Mars' Andy shet his eyes an' begun ter say his prayers; when pop! bang! off went a musket from behind a tree, an' down went Mr. Rider jes' like a grasshopper when a turkey-gobbler nips him off a sweet-potater vine!"

"De captin tuk on mightily about our side gittin' beat," continued Dee Jay, encouraged by my laughter; "he ain't let his hair grow sence Vicksburg fell, an' it turned grisly gray dat same night. It was jes' struck all of a heap. Dat's why de people here think so much o' Mars' Andy. Dey has sech respect fur his strong feelin's."

"I wish his strong feelings would lead him to pay his debts," muttered I.

Mr. Rucker was not so cruel as to stay under a cloud all day. In the afternoon he burst into my room, beaming like the sun to which he had been compared.

"It's all settled, my friend," he cried.

"What! the debt?"

"Bother the debt! A question of money should not arise between gentlemen."

"Gentlemen should pay what they owe," said I, grimly.

"Softly, lad, softly. You are almost on the point of being uncivil, in which case I should have to leave you to yourself."

Dreading another disappearance on Mr. Rucker's part, I said:

"Really, sir, I had no intention of being uncivil. What is it that is settled?"

"The chase—the hunt for the horny-heeled son of Ham."

"That joke again?"

"No joke about it. There is an idle fellow here—Bud Kane by name—who was caught hog-stealing about a month back. He has been hiding among the hills, and we think it well to get him off our hands before Christmas."

"You wouldn't kill the man?"

"Oh, no; only scare him a bit. If he gives us a good run we will let him off scot-free. And he is the fleetest scamp in the country. Lucky to be able to offer you such sport."

"My good Mr. Rucker," said I, attempting to speak with great moderation, "unequaled as such sport must be, you must allow me to decline a share in it. You know my object in coming here—"

"My dear fellow," interrupted Rucker, "that is all right. I have plenty of money burning for your pocket. But just now I can't think of anything but the merry hunt. Come, let us have it over, and then to business. I will promise that you shall be fully satisfied. Perhaps, however, you are not a rider?"

It was silly of me, but I was really piqued, and thought I should like to show this rough man of Sarsar whether I could ride or not. I reflected, too, that it might be well to humor his wish and join his hunting party—it would probably turn out some portentous joke played by the Gentlemen of Sarsar. After it was "played out," Mr. Rucker could hardly fail to meet my demands, hand over the money, and let me get back to civilization—civilization and Angie Bell.

"Well, well," said I carelessly, "get me a decent mount, and I'll join your party," whereon Mr. Rucker gave a tremendous grin and hurried away.

At a ridiculously early hour the next morning I was aroused by a wild "Halloo!" under my window. Looking out, I saw the Gentlemen of Sarsar in force—some twenty or more vagabond-looking fellows, mounted on horses too nobly built for such riders, all laughing, gesticulating, and occasionally firing at the incautious chickens roosting in the trees about the house. They were rigged out like a lot of banditti. Some were armed with rifles, and all seemed to have equipped themselves with what was left over from their war equipments, including horse-pistols, and bowie-knives, cavalry boots, and devil-may-care hats. I must say I felt uncommonly ticklish—as much so as if I had been in Arabia with a set of Bedouins inviting me for "sport" to plunder one of the desert caravans. However, I gulped down my scruples with the morning cocktail which we all took at the bar of the widow Joplin, and listened patiently while Mr. Rucker gasconaded about the wonderful shots he had made, the tremendous leaps his horse had taken over gullies and logs.

"Unless you can stand rip-racing through the country as if you were trying to shake hands with the lightning," said he, "you had better not try to keep up with the hunt, but take a stand on some overlooking hill—"

"Mr. Rucker," cried I, "spare yourself any fears for me."

"All right, then. Let's be off, boys."

They leaped to their saddles with Texan agility; half a dozen stage-hounds were brought to the front; and with another "Halloo!" we were off.

Never shall I forget that ride. The keen morning air was a stimulus that thrilled every sense