IRENE THE FOUNDLING;

Or, The Slave's Revenge.

By the Author of "The Banker of Bedford."

CHAPTER II.—Continued.

"Mamma, oh, mamma!" said Oleah, shaking his mother's arm, as she did not pay immediate attention to his call.

"What, dear?" she asked.

"Are we goin' to keep it?"

"Yes, dear; if some one who has a better right to it does not come to claim it."

"They shan't have it," cried Oleah, stamping his little, bare foot on the carpet.

"No," added Abner; "it's ours now. They left it there to starve and freeze, and now we will keep it."

"You think, then, that the real owner has lost his title by his neglect?" said the father, with a smile.

"Yes, that's it," the boy answered.

"It's a very good common law idea, my son."

Dinah now came in with warm milk for the baby, and Mrs. Tompkins told her to take the two to their room and dress them; but they wanted to wait first and see the baby eat.

"Oh, don't it eat; don't it eat!" cried the boys.

"The poor little thing is almost starved," said the mother.

"Missus, how d'ye reckin it came on the porch?" Dinah asked.

"I cannot think who would have left it," answered Mrs. Tompkins.

"That is not a very young baby," said Mr. Tompkins, watching the little creature eat greedily from the spoon, for Dinah had now taken it and was feeding it.

"No, marster, not berry, 'cause it's got two or free teef," said the nurse. "Spect it's 'bout six months old."

As soon as the little stranger had been fed, Dinah wrapped it in a warm blanket and laid it on Mrs. Tompkins' bed, where it soon fell asleep, showing it w[illegible] exhausted as well as hungry. Dinah then led the two boys to the room to wash and dress them.

"Strange, strange!" said Mrs. Tompkins, beginning to dress. "Who can the little thing belong to, and what are we to do with it!"

"Keep it, I suppose," said Mr. Tompkins; and, stumbling over a boot-jack, he exclaimed in the same breath, "Oh, confound it!"

"What, the baby?"

"No, the boot-jack. I've stubbed my toe on it."

"We have no right to take upon ourselves the rearing of other people's children," said Mrs. Tompkins, paying no attention to her husband's trifling injury.

"But it's our Christian duty to see that the little thing does not die of cold and hunger," said Mr. Tompkins, caressing his aching toe.

Soon the boys came in, ready for breakfast, and inquired for the baby; when told that it was sleeping, they wanted to see it asleep, and stole on tiptoe to the bed, where the wearied little thing lay, and nothing would satisfy them until they were permitted to touch the pale, pinched, tear-stained cheek with their fresh, warm lips.

The breakfast bell rang, and they went down to the dining-room, where awaiting them was a breakfast such as only Aunt Susan could prepare. They took their places at the table, while a negro girl stood behind each, to wait upon them and to drive away flies with long brushes of peacock feathers. The boys were so much excited by the advent of the strange baby that they could scarcely keep quiet long enough to eat.

"I am going to draw it on my wagon," said Oleah.

"I'm going to let it ride my pony," said Abner.

"Don't think too much of the baby yet, for some one may come and claim it," said their mother.

"They shan't have it, shall they, papa?" cried Oleah.

"No, it is our baby now."

"And we are going to keep it, ain't we, Aunt Susan?" he asked the cook, as she entered the dining-room.

"Yes, bress yo' little heart; dat baby am yours," said Aunt Susan.

"It's a Christmas gift, ain't it, Maggie?" he asked the waiter behind him. Oleah was evidently determined to array everyone's opinion against his mother's supposition.

"Yes, I reckin it am," the negro girl answered with a grin.

"Ha, ha, h!" laughed Abner. "Why, Oleah, this a'n't Christmas."

Seeing his mistake, Oleah joined in the laugh, but soon commenced again.

"We're goin' to make the baby a nice, new play-house, ain't we, Abner?"

"Yes, and a swing."

The baby slept nearly all the forenoon. When she woke (for it was a girl) she was washed, and dressed in some of Master Oleah's clothes, and Mrs. Tompkins declared the child a marvel of beauty, and when the little thing turned her dark eyes on her benefactor with a confiding smile the lady resolved that no sorrow that she could avert should cloud the sweet, innocent face.

When the boys came in they began a war dance, which made the baby scream with delight. Impetuous Oleah snatched her from his mother's lap, and both boy and baby rolled over on the floor, fortunately not hurting either. His mother scolded, but the baby crowed and laughed, and he showered a hundred kisses on the little white face.

A boy about twelve years of age was coming down the lane. He entered the gate and was coming towards the house. Mr. Tompkins, who was in the sitting-room, in a moment recognized the boy as Crazy Joe, and told his wife about the unfortunate lad. He met the boy on the porch.

"How do you do, Joe?" he asked, extending his hand.

"I am well," Joe answered. "Have you seen my father Jacob or my brother Benjamin?"

"No, they have not yet come," answered the planter.

For several years after, Joe was a frequent visitor. There was no moment's lapse of his melancholy madness, which yet seemed to have a peculiar method in it, and the mystery that hid his past but deepened and intensified.

CHAPTER III.

DINNER TALK.

America furnishes to the world her share o politicians. The United States, with her free government, her freedom of thought, freedom of speech and freedom of press, is prolific in their production. One who had given the subject but little thought, and no investigation, would be amazed to know their number. Nearly every boy born in the United States becomes a politician, with views more or less pronounced, and the subject is by no means neglected by the feminine portion of the community. That part of Virginia, the scene of our story, abounded with "village tavern and cross-roads politicians." Snagtown, on Briar creek, was a village not more than three miles from Mr. Tompkins'. It boasted of two taverns and three saloons, where loafers congregated to talk about the weather, the doings in Congress, the terrib[illegible] of the country, and their exploits in catching "runaway niggers." A large per cent of our people pay more attention to Congressional matters than to their own affairs. We do not deny that it is every man's right to understand the grand machinery of this Government, but he should not devote to it the time which should be spent in caring for his family. Politics should not intoxicate men and lead them from the paths of honest industry, and furnish food for toughs to digest at taverns and street corners.

Anything which affords a topic of conversation is eagerly welcomed by the loafer; and it is little wonder that politics is a theme that rouses all his enthusiasm. It not only affords him food, but drink as well, during a campaign. Many are the neglected wives and starving children who, in cold and cheerless homes, await the return of the husband and father, who sits, warm and comfortable, in some tavern, laying plans for the election of a school director or a town overseer.

Snagtown could tell its story. It contained many such neglected homes, and the thriftless vagabonds who constituted the voting majority never failed to raise an excitement, to provoke bitter feelings and foment quarrels on election day.

Plump, and short, and sleek was Mr. Hezekiah Diggs, the justice of the peace of Snagtown. Like many justices of the peace, he brought to the performance of his duties little native intelligence, and less acquired erudition; but what he lacked in brains he made up in brass. He was one of the foremost of the political gossipers of Snagtown, and had filled his present position for several years.

'Squire Diggs was hardly in what might be termed even moderate circumstances, though he and his family made great pretension in society. He was one of that rare class in Virginia—a poor man who had managed by some inexplicable means, to work his way into the better class of society. His wife, unlike himself, was tall, slender and sharp visaged. Like him, she was an incessant talker, and her gossip frequently caused trouble in the neighborhood. Scandal was seized on as a sweet morsel by the hungry Mrs. Diggs, and she never let pass an opportunity to spread it, like a pestilence, over the town.

They had one son, now about twelve years of age, the joy and pride of their hearts, and as he was capable of declaiming, "The boy stood on the burning deck," his proud father discovered in him the future orator of America, and determined that Patrick Henry Diggs should study law and enter the field of politics. The boy, full of his father's conviction, and of a conceit all his own, felt within his soul a rising greatness which one day would make him the foremost man of the Nation. He did not object to his father's plan; he was willing to become either a statesman or a lawyer, but having read the life of Washington, he would have chosen to be a general, only that there were now no redcoats to fight. Poor as Diggs' family was, they boasted that they associated only with the *elite* of Southern society.

'Squire Diggs had informed Mr. Tompkins that he and his family would pay him a visit on a certain day, as he wished to consult him on some political matters, and Mr. Tompkins and his hospitable lady, *setting aside social* differences, prepared to make their visitors welcome. On the appointed day they were driven up in their antiquated carriage, drawn by an old gray horse, and driven by a negro coachman older than either. Mose was the only slave that the 'Squire owned, and though sixty years of age, he served the family faithfully in a multiform capacity. He pulled up at the door of the mansion, and climbing out somewhat slowly, owing to age and rheumatism, he opened the carriage door and assisted the occupants to alight.

Though Mrs. Tompkins felt an unavoidable repugnance for the gossiping Mrs. Diggs, she was too sensible a hostess to treat an uninvited guest otherwise than cordially.

"I've been just dying to come and see you," said Mrs. Diggs, as soon as she had removed her wraps and taken her seat in an easy chair, with a bottle of smelling salts in her hand and her gold-plated spectacles on her nose, "you have been having so many strange things happen here; and I told the 'Squire we must come over, for I thought the drive might do me good, and I wanted to hear all about the murder of your husband's brother's family, and see that strange baby and the crazy boy. Isn't it strange, though? Who could have committed that awful murder? Who put that baby on your piazza, and who is this crazy boy?"

Mrs. Tompkins arrested this stream of interrogatories by saying that it was all a mystery, and they had as yet been unable to find a clew. Baffled at the very onset in the chief object of her visit, Mrs. Diggs turned her thoughts at once into new channels, and, graciously overlooking Mrs. Tompkins' inability to gratify her curiosity, began to recount the news and gossip and small scandals of the neighborhood.

'Squire Diggs was in the midst of an animated conversation on his favorite theme, the politics of the day. The slavery question was just assuming prominence. Henry Clay, Martin Van Buren, and others, had at times hinted at emancipation, while John Brown and Jared Clarkson, and a host of lesser lights, were making the Nation quake with the thunders of their eloquence from rostrum and pulpit. 'Squire Diggs was bitter in his denunciations of the Northerners, believing that they intended "to take our niggers from us." He invariably emphasized the pronoun, and always spoke of *niggers* in the plural, as though he owned a hundred instead of one. 'Squire Diggs was one of a class of people in the South known as the most bitter slavery men, the small slaveholders—a class that bewailed most loudly the freedom of the negro, because they had few to free. At dinner he said:

"Slavery is of divine origin, and all John Brown and Jared Clarkson can say will never convince the world otherwise."

"I sometimes think," said Mr. Tompkins, "that the country would be better off with the slaves all in Siberia."

"What? My dear sir, how could we exist?" cried 'Squire Diggs, his small eyes growing round with wonder. "If the slaves were taken from us, who would cultivate these vast fields?"

"Do it ourselves, or by hired help," answered the planter.

"My dear sir, the idea is impracticable," said the 'Squire, hotly. "We cannot give up our slaves. Slavery is of divine origin. The niggers, descending from Ham, were cursed into slavery. The Bible says so, and no nigger-loving Abolitionist need deny it."

"I believe my husband is an emancipationist," said Mrs. Tompkins, with a smile.

"I am," said Mr. Tompkins; "not so much for the slaves' good as for the masters'. Slavery is a curse to both white and black, and more to the white than to the black. The two races can never live together in harmony, and the sooner they are separated the better."

"How would you like to free them and leave them among us?" asked the 'Squire.

"That even would be better than to keep them among us in bondage."

"But Henry Clay, in his great speech on African colonization in the House of Representatives, says: 'Of all classes of our population, the most vicious is the free colored.' And, my dear sir, were this horde of blacks turned loose upon us, without masters or overseers to keep them in restraint, our lives would not be safe for a day. Domineering niggers would be our masters, would claim the right to vote and hold office. Imagine, my dear sir, an ignorant nigger holding an important office like that of justice of the peace. Consider for a moment, Mr. Tompkins, all the horrors which would be the natural result of a lazy, indolent race, incapable of earning their own living, unless urged by the lash, being turned loose to shift for themselves. Slavery is more a blessing to the slave than to the master. What was the condition of the negro in his native wilds? He was a ruthless savage, hunting and fighting, and eating fellow-beings captured in war. He knew no God, and worshipped snakes, the sun and moon, and everything he could not understand. Our slave-traders found them in this state of barbarism and misery. They brought him here, and taught him to till the soil, and trained him in the ways of peace, and led him to worship the true and living God. Our niggers now have food to eat and clothes to wear, when in their native country they were hungry and naked. They now enjoy all the blessings of an advanced civilization, whereas they were once in the lowest barbarism. Set them free, and they will drift back into their former state."

"A blessing may be made out of their bondage," replied Mr. Tompkins. "As Henry Clay said in the speech from which you have quoted, 'they will carry back to their native soil the rich fruits of religion, civilization, law and liberty. And may it not be one of the great designs of the Ruler of the universe (whose ways are often inscrutable by short-sighted mortals) thus to transform original crime into a single blessing to the most unfortunate portions of the globe?' But I fear we uphold slavery rather for our own mercenary advantages than as a blessing either to our country or to either race."

"Why, Mr. Tompkins, you are advocating Abolition doctrine," said Mrs. Diggs.

"I believe I am, and that abolition is right."

"Would you be willing to lose your own slaves to have the niggers freed?" asked the astonished 'Squire.

"I would willingly lose them to rid our country of a blighting curse."

"I would not," said Mrs. Tompkins, her Southern blood fired by the discussion. "My husband is a Northern man, and advocates principles that were instilled into his mind from infancy; but I oppose abolition from principle. Slaves should be treated well and made to know their place; but to let them free and ruin thousands of people in the South is the idea of fanatics."

"I'm mamma's Democrat," said Oleah, who, seated at his mother's side, concluded it best to approve her remarks by proclaiming his own political creed.

"And I am papa's Whig," announced Abner, who was at his father's side.

"That's right, my son. You don't believe that people, because they are black, should be bought and sold and beaten like cattle, do you?" asked the father, looking down, half in jest and half in earnest, at his eldest born.

"No; set the negroes free, and Oleah and I will plow and drive wagons," he replied, quickly.

"You don't believe it's right to take people's property from them for nothing and leave people poor, do you, Oleah?" asked the mother, in laughing retaliation.

"No, I don't," replied the young Southern aristocrat.

"You are liable to have both political parties represented in your own family," said 'Squire Diggs. "Here's a difference of opinion already."

"Their differences will be easy to reconcile, for never did brothers love each other as these do," returned Mr. Tompkins, little dreaming that this difference of opinion was a breach that would widen, widen and widen, separating the loving brothers, and bringing untold misery to his peaceful home.

"What are you in favor of, Patrick Henry?" Mrs. Diggs asked, in her shrill, sharp tones, of her own hopeful son.

"I'm in favor of freedom and the Stars and Stripes," answered Patrick Henry, gnawing vigorously at the chicken bone he held in his hand.

"He's a patriot," exclaimed the 'Squire. "He talks of nothing so much as Revolutionary days and Revolutionary heroes. He has such a taste for military life that I'd send him to West Point, but his mother objects."

"Yes, I do object," put in the shrill-voiced, cadaverous Mrs. Diggs, "They don't take a child of mine to their strict military schools. Why, what if he was to get sick, away off there, and me here? I wouldn't stop day or night till I got there."

Dinner over, the party repaired to the parlor, and 'Squire Diggs asked his son to speak "one of his pieces" for the entertainment of the company.

"What piece shall I say?" asked Patrick Henry, as anxious to display his oratorical talents as his father was to have him.

"The piece that begins, 'I come not here to talk,'" said Mrs. Diggs, her sallow features lit up with a smile that showed the tips of her false teeth.

Several of the negroes, learning that a show of some kind was about to begin in the parlor, crowded about the room, peeping in at the doors and windows. Patrick Henry took his position in the centre of the room, struck a pompous attitude, standing high as his short legs would permit, and, brushing the hair from his forehead, bowed to his audience and, in a high, loud monotone, began:

"I come not to talk! You know too well
The story of our thraldom. We—we—"

He paused and bowed his head.

"We are slaves," prompted the mother, who was listening with eager interest. Mrs. Diggs had heard her son "say his piece" so often that she had learned it herself, and now served as prompter. Patrick Henry continued:

"We are slaves.
The bright moon rises—"

"No, sun," interrupted his mother.

"The bright sun rises in the East and lights
A race of slaves. He sets—and the—last thing"—

The young orator was gone off the track.

"And his last beam falls on a slave," again the fond mother prompted.

By being frequently prompted, Patrick Henry managed to "speak his piece through."

While the mother, alert and watchful, listened and prompted, the father, short, and sleek, and fat, leaned back in his chair, one short leg just able to reach across the other, listening with satisfied pride to his son's display.

"The poor child has forgotten some of it," said the mother, at the conclusion.

"Yes," added the father; "he don't speak much now, and so has forgotten a great deal that he knew."

Mr. Tompkins and his wife, inwardly regretting that he had not forgotten all, willingly excused Patrick Henry from any further efforts. And though they had welcomed and entertained their guests with the cordial Southern hospitality, they felt somewhat relieved when the Diggs carriage, with its ancient, dark-skinned coachman, rolled away over the hills towards Snagtown.

CHAPTER IV.

MORE OF THE MYSTERY.

We have seen the perfect harmony which prevailed in the household of Mr. Tompkins, though his wife and himself were of totally different temperaments, and, on many subjects, held opposite opinions. He, with his cool Northern blood, was careful and deliberate, slow in drawing conclusions or forming a decision; but, once his stand was taken, firm as a rock. She had all the quick Southern impetuosity, that at times found rash expression, though her head was as clear and her heart as warm as her husband's. Her prejudices were stronger than his, and her reason was more frequently swayed by them.

The great Missouri Compromise was supposed to have settled the question of slavery forever, and abolition was regarded only as the dream of visionary fanatics. Though a freeholder by birth and principle, circumstances had made Mr. Tompkins a slaveholder. He seldom expressed his sentiments to his Southern neighbors, knowing how repugnant they were to their feelings; but when his opinions were asked for he always gave them freely. The movements on the political checker-board belong rather to history than to a narrative of individual lives, yet because of their effect on these lives, some of the most important must be mentioned. While the abolition party was yet in embryo, the Southern statesmen, or many of them, seeming to read the fate of slavery in the future, had declared that the Union of States was only a compact or co-partnership, which could be dissolved at the option of the contracting parties. This gave rise to the principle of States' rights and secession, and when the emancipation of the slaves was advocated, Southern politicians began to talk more and more of dissolution.

Not only in political assemblies was the subject discussed, but even in family circles, as we have seen. Mrs. Tompkins, of course, differed from her husband on the subject of "State" rights, as she did on slavery, and many were their debates on the theme. Their little sons, observing their parents' interest in these questions, became concerned themselves, and, as was very natural, took sides. Abner was the Whig and Oleah his mother's Democrat. Still, love and harmony dwelt in that happy household, though the prophetic ear might have heard in the distant future the rattle of musketry on that fair, quiet lawn, and the clash of brothers' swords in mortal combat beneath the roof which had sheltered their infancy.

Little did these fond parents dream of the deep root those seeds of political difference had taken in the breasts of their children, and the bitter fruit of misery and horror they would bear. Their lives now ran as quietly as a meadow brook. All the long summer days they played without an angry word or thought, or if either was hurt or grieved a kiss or a tender word would heal the wound.

The tragic fate of his brother's family, and his unavailing efforts to bring the murderers to justice, directed Mr. Tompkins' thoughts into new channels. The strange baby grew in strength and beauty every day. Its mysterious appearance among them continued to puzzle the family, and all their efforts failed to bring any light on the subject. The servant to whom was assigned the washing of the clothes the baby had on when found was charged by her mistress to look closely for marks and letters upon them. When her work was done, she came to Mrs. Tompkins' room, and that lady asked:

"Have you found anything, Hannah?"

"Yes, missus; here am a word writ some letters in it," the woman answered, holding up a little underskirt and pointing to some faint lines.

Mrs. Tompkins took the garment, which, before being washed, had been so soiled that even more legible lines than these would have been undistinguishable; it was of the finest linen, and faintly, yet surely, was the word "Irene" traced with indelible ink.

"As soon as all the clothes had been washed and dried, bring them to me," said Mrs. Tompkins, hoping to find some other clew to the child's parentage.

"Yes, missus," and Hannah went back to her washing.

"Irene," repeated Mrs. Tompkins aloud, as she looked down on the baby, who was sitting on the rug, making things lively among a heap of toys Abner and Oleah had placed before her.

The baby looked up and began crowing with delight.

"Oh, bless the darling; it knows its name!" cried Mrs. Tompkins. "Poor little thing, it has seldom heard it lately. Irene! Irene! Irene!"

The baby, laughing and shouting, reached out its arms to the lady, who caught it up and pressed it to her heart.

"Oh, mamma!" cried Oleah, running into the room, with his brother at his heels, "me and Abner have just been talking about what to call the baby. He wants to call it Tommy, and that's a boy's name, ain't it, mamma?"

"Of course it is—"

"And our baby is a girl, and must have a girl's name, mustn't it, mamma?"

"Yes."

"I just said Tommy was a nice name; if our baby was a boy we'd call it Tommy," explained Abner.

"But the baby has a name—a real pretty name," said the mother.

"A name! a name! What is it?" the brothers cried, capering about, and setting the baby almost wild with delight.

"Her name is Irene," said Mrs. Tompkins.

"Oh, mamma, where did you get such a pretty name?" asked Abner.

"Who said it was Irene?" put in Oleah.

"I found it written on some of the clothes it wore the morning we found it," answered the mother.

"Then we will call it Irene," said Abner, decisively.

"Irene! Irene! Little Irene! ain't you awful sweet?" cried the impetuous Oleah, snatching the baby from his mother's arms and smothering its screams of delight with kisses. So enthusiastic was the little fellow that the baby was in peril, and his mother, spite of his protestations, took it from him. As soon as released, little Irene's feet and hands began to play, and she responded, with soft cooing and baby laughter, to all the boys' noisy demonstrations.

A youth, with large sad eyes and pale face, now entered the door.

"Oh, come, Joe, come and see the baby!" cried Oleah. "Isn't it sweet? Just look at its pretty bright eyes and its cunning little mouth."

Joe had visited the plantation frequently of late, and Mr. Tompkins having given orders that he should always be kindly treated, had finally established himself there, and was now considered rather a member of the household than a guest.

The poor, insane boy came close to Mrs. Tompkins' side and looked fixedly at the baby for a few moments. An expression of pain passed over his face, as though some long forgotten sorrow was recalled to his mind.

"I remember it now," he finally said. "It was at the great carnival feast, and after the gladiators fought, this babe, which was the son of the man who was slain, was given to the lions to devour, but although it was cast in the den, the lions would not harm a hair of its head."

"Oh, no, Joe; you are mistaken," said Abner; "it was Daniel who was cast into the lions' den."

"You are right," said Crazy Joe. "It was Daniel; but I remember this baby. It was one of the two taken by the cruel uncle and placed in a trough and put in the river. The river overflowed the banks and left the babes at the root of a tree, where the wolf found them, and taking compassion on the children, came every day and furnished them nourishment from his own breast."

"No, no," interrupted Abner, who, young as he was, knew something of Roman mythology. "You are talking about Romulus and Remus."

"Ah, yes," sighed the poor youth, striving in vain to gather up his wandering faculties; "but I have seen this child before. If it was not the one concealed among the bulrushes, then what can it be?"

"It's our baby," put in Oleah, "and it wasn't in no bulrushes; it was in the clothes-basket on the porch."

"It was a willow ark," said Joe; "its mother hid it there, for a decree had gone forth that all male children of the Israelites should be exterminated—"

"No; it was a willow basket," interrupted Oleah. "Its mother shan't have it again. It's our little baby. This baby ain't a liverite, and it shan't be sterminated, shall it, mamma?"

"No, dear; no one shall harm this baby," said Mrs. Tompkins.

"It's our baby, isn't it, mamma?"

"Yes, my child, unless some one else comes for it who has a better right to it."

"Who could that be, mamma?"

"Perhaps its own father or mother might come—"

"They shan't have it if they do," cried Oleah, stamping his little foot resolutely on the floor."

Joe rose from the low chair on which he had been sitting, and went out, saying something about his father coming down into Egypt.

"Mamma," said Abner, when Joe had gone out, "what makes him say such strange things?" He says that he is Joseph, and that his brothers sold him into Egypt, and he calls papa the captain of the guard. He goes out into the fields and watches the negroes work, and says he is Potiphar's overseer, and must attend to his household."

"Poor boy, he is insane, my son," answered Mrs. Tompkins; "he is very unfortunate, and you must not tease him. Let him believe he is Joseph, for it will make him feel happier to have his delusion carried out by others."

"The other day, when we were playing in the barn, Joe and Oleah and me, I saw a great scar and sore place on poor Joe's head, just like some one had struck him. I asked him what did it, and he said he fell with his head on a sharp rock when his brothers threw him into the pit."

Oleah now was anxious to go back to his play, and dragged his brother out of the house to the lawn, leaving Mrs. Tompkins alone with the baby.

Several weeks after the baby and Crazy Joe became inmates of Mr. Tompkins' house, a man, dressed in trowsers of brown jeans and hunting shirt of tanned deer skin, wearing a broad-brimmed hat and heavy boots, came to the mansion. The autumn day was delightful; it was after the fall rains. The Indian summer haze hung over hill, and mountain, and valley, and the sun glowed with mellowed splendor. The stranger carried a rifle, from which a wild turkey was suspended, and wore the usual bullet-pouch and powder-horn of the hunter slung across his shoulder. He was tall and wiry, about thirty-five years of age, and, to use his own expression, as "active as a cat and strong as a lion."

Daniel Martin, or "Uncle Dan," as he was more generally known, was a typical Virginia mountaineer, whose cabin was on the side of a mountain fifteen miles from Mr. Tompkins' plantation. He was noted for his bravery and his bluntness, and for the unerring aim of his rifle.

He was the friend of the rich and poor, and his little cabin frequently afforded shelter for the tourist or the sportsman. He was called "Uncle Dan" by all the younger people, simply because he would not allow himself to be called Mr. Martin.

"No, siree," he would say; "no misterin' fur me. I was never brought up to it, and I can't tote the load now." He persisted in being called "Uncle Dan," especially by the children. "It seems more home-like," he would say.

Why he had not wife and children to make his cabin "home-like" was frequently a theme for discussion among the gossips, and, as they could arrive at no other conclusion, they finally decided that he must have been crossed in love.

Mr. Tompkins, who chanced to be on the veranda, observed the hunter enter the gate, and met him with an extended hand and smile of welcome, saying:

"Good morning, Dan. It is so long since you have been here that your face is almost the face of a stranger."

"Ya-as, it's a'most a coon's age, and an old coon at that, since I been on these grounds. How's all the folks?" he answered, grasping Mr. Tompkins' out-stretched hand.

"They are all well, and will be delighted to see you Dan. Come in."

"Ye see I brought a gobbler," said Dan, removing the turkey from his shoulder. "I thought maybe ye'd be wantin' some wild meat, and I killed one down on the creek afore I came."

Mr. Tompkins took the turkey, and calling a negro boy, bade him take it to the cook to be prepared for dinner. Then he conducted his guest to the veranda. Uncle Dan placed his long rifle and accoutrements in a far corner, and sat down by Mr. Tompkins.

"Wall, how's times about heah, any how, and how's politicks?" he asked, as soon as seated.

The mountain air in America, as in Switzerland, seems to inspire those who breathe it with love of liberty. The dwellers on the mountains of Virginia, North Carolina and Tennessee were chiefly Abolitionists, who hated the slave-holder as free men do tyrants, and when the great struggle came on they remained loyal to the Government. As a rule, they were poor, but self-respecting, possessing a degree of intelligence far superior to that of most of the lower class of the South.

The secret of the friendship between the planter and the hunter was that both were, at heart, opposed to human bondage, and though they seldom expressed their real sentiments, even when alone, each knew the other's feelings.

Before Mr. Tompkins could reply to the mountaineer's question, Abner and Oleah ran up to the veranda with shouts of joy and noisy demonstrations of welcome. Uncle Dan placed one on each knee, and for some time the boys claimed all his attention.

"Oh, Uncle Dan, you can't guess what we've got," Oleah cried.

"Why, no; I can't. What is it?" asked Uncle Dan, abandoning attempt to return to the social chat the boys had interrupted.

"A baby! a baby!" cried Oleah, clapping his hands.

"A baby?" repeated Uncle Dan, in astonishment.

"Yes, sir; a bran new baby, just as sweet as it can be, too."

The puzzled mountaineer, with a suspicious look at Mr. Tompkins, said: "Thought ye said the folks was all well?"

"They are," answered Mr. Tompkins, with an amused smile.

"Dinah found the baby in a clothes-basket," put in Abner.

"Oh, it's a nigger baby, is it?" asked Uncle Dan.

"No, no, no, its a white baby—a white baby," both boys quickly replied.

"What do the children mean?" asked Uncle Dan, bewildered, looking from the boys to their father.

"They mean just what they say," said Mr. Tompkins. "A baby was left at our door a short time ago in the clothes-basket by some unknown person."

"Don't you want to see it, Uncle Dan?" Master Oleah eagerly asked.

"To be sure I do. I always liked babies; they are the perfection o' innocence."

Before he had finished his sentence, Oleah had climbed down from his knee, and was scampering away toward the nursery. Abner was not more than two seconds in following him.

"Wall, now, see heah," said the hunter; "while them young rattletraps is gone, jest tell me what all this means. Hez some one been increasin' yer family by leavin' babies a layin' around loose, or is it a big doll some one haz give the boys?"

"It's just as the boys say," Mr. Tompkins answered. "Some one did actually leave a baby about six months old on this porch, and no one knows who he was, where he came from, or where he went."

"That's mighty strange. How long ago was it?"

"About six weeks."

"Wall, now, ain't that strange? Have you any suspicion who done it?"

"Not the least."

"Wall, it is strange. Never saw no un sneakin' about the house, like?"

"No one at all."

"Humph! Well, it's dog gone strange."

At this moment the two boys, with Dinah in attendance, came out, bearing between them little Irene.

"Here it is; here is our baby! Ain't she sweet, though?" cried Oleah, as they bore their precious burden toward the mountaineer.

"Why it's a spankin' big un, by jingo! Ya-as, an' I be blessed ef I ain't seen that baby before," cried Uncle Dan.

"Where?" asked Mr. Tompkins, eagerly.

Uncle Dan took the little thing on his lap, and, as it turned its large dark-gray eyes up to his in wonder, he reflected a few minutes in silence and then said:

"I saw a baby what looked like this, and I'll bet a good deal it is the same one, too."

"Where did you see it?" again demanded the planter.

"That's jest what I'm tryin' to think up," said Uncle Dan. "Oh, yes; it war in the free nigger's cabin, on the side o' the east Twin Mountain. You know where the old cabin stands, where we used to camp when we war out huntin'?"

"Yes."

"Wall, I war roamin' by there one day, and found two nigger men and a woman livin' there. They had this baby with them, and I questioned them as to where they war gwine, but one nigger, who had a scar slaunch-ways across his face," here the narrator made an imaginary mark diagonally across his left cheek to indicate what he meant by "slaunch-ways," "said they war gwine to live thar. I asked 'em whar they got the baby, and they said its people war dead, and they war to take it to some of its relations. I left 'em soon, for I couldn't git much out o' them, but I determined to keep an eye on 'em. The next time I came by that way they were gone, bag and baggage."

"The free nigger's cabin is at least twenty miles from here," said Mr. Tompkins. "It is strange why they should bring the baby all that way here and leave it."

"It do look strange, but I guess they war runaway niggers what had stole the child out of spite, and when they got heah give out an' left it. I kinder think theso niggers war from the South."

"Have you ever seen or heard of them since?" asked Mr. Tompkins.

"Neither har nor hide."

At this moment a stranger to Uncle Dan came sauntering up the lawn, and, stepping on the porch, addressed them with:

"Can you tell me where my brothers feed their flocks?"

"He's crazy," whispered Abner to the hunter. "He's crazy, and mamma says pretend as if he was talking sense."

"Oh, they are out thar somewhar on the hills, I reckin'," Uncle Dan answered.

Joe looked at the mountaineer for a moment, carefully examining the hunting jacket of tanned skins, the hair of which formed an ornamental fringe, and then said:

"I know you now. You are my Uncle Esau; but why should you be here in Egypt? It was you who grew angry with my father because he got your birthright for a mess of potage. You sought to slay him and he fled. Have you come to mock his son?"

"Oh, no, youngster; yer pap and me hev made up that little fuss long ago. I forgive him that little steal, an' now we ar' all squar' agin."

"But why are you in Egypt? You must be very old. My father, who is younger than you, is old—bowed down—"

"Poor boy," said Mr. Tompkins, with a sigh, "he has been a close student, and perhaps that was what turned his head."

"Does he ever git rantankerous?" asked Uncle Dan.

"No; he is always mild and harmless."

"Have you seen my father?" Joe now asked. He has long white hair and snowy beard."

"No, youngster; I ain't got a sight o' the old man fur some time," said Uncle Dan.

"Potiphar resembles my father, but my father must be dead," and he sank into a chair, with a sad look of despair, and, burying his face in his hands, groaned as if in pain.

"He does that way a dozen times a day," Abner whispered to Uncle Dan.

"It's maughty strange," said Uncle Dan, shaking his head in a puzzled manner.

The next day, when the mountaineer was about to return to his lonely cabin, Crazy Joe asked permission to accompany his Uncle Esau. Consent was given, and he went and stayed several weeks. For years afterward he stayed alternate on Mr. Tompkins' plantation and at the home of the mountaineer.

CHAPTER V.

THE MUD MAN.

Sixteen years, with all their joys and sorrows, all their pleasures and pains, have been numbered with the dead past. Boys have grown to be men, men in the full vigor of their prime have grown old, and creep about with bent forms and heads whitening, while men who were old before now slumber with the dead. Girls are women, and women have grown gray, yet father Time has touched gently some of his children.

Abner and Oleah Tompkins are no longer boys. Only the memory is left them of their childhood joys, when they played in the dark, cool woods, or by the brook in the wide, smooth lawn. Happy childhood days, when neither care nor anxiety weighed on their young hearts, or shadowed their bright faces.

Abner is twenty-five—a tall, powerful man, with dark-blue, fearless eyes, light-haired, broad-chested and muscular.

(To be Continued.)