

Old Mamma's Jim.

By Welthyn Western.

"Wen de great trump shall sound
I'll be dyar;
Wen de great trump shall sound
I'll be dyar."

Over and over in monotonous measure rose the song from hundreds of dusky throats, high and strong, with notes of triumph then gradually sinking lower, until almost unintelligible, as the weary voices clung to the refrain with a sort of dull assurance, again rolling forth with doubled energy, when the singers, ragged, breathless, and aor, or recruits struck in vigorously, their bodies swaying from side to side and outstretched arms beating time.

Beyond and all around the tented and illuminated platform were crowds of colored people and quite a considerable sprinkling of whites. The negroes looked earnest and serious. Once in a while a young darkey's loud undertone or a girl's subdued giggle attracted attention, or a child waited out in alarm and fretfulness, but these distractions were sternly frowned upon. It was the last night of the camp meeting and enthusiasm and religious fervor ran high, although the preacher had not yet arrived.

"Wen de angels come a flyin'
Tro de yair,
I'll be dyar;
Wen de angels come a flyin'
Tro de yair,
I'll be dyar."

The words were started by a little group near the edge of the pulpit. These voices were clear and musical. One young convert's tenor was strikingly pure and sweet, while his black features were all aglow with animation. A mulatto near by falling at half length on a rude bench fixed his attention upon the singer. "How d'ye know yo will?" he questioned, with a coarse laugh, edging around upon his elbow and peering out from beneath the brim of his slouch hat that was pulled down to the bridge of his brows. It was a wicked face, and his traces showed bold and hideous lines upon the rugged negro features; his eyes deeper set than is common with his race, and gleaming with scornful intensity; there was a dull scar across his jaw; his whole expression one of evil bravado. "How d'ye know yo'll be dyar?" he sneered again, dragging his chin up from the palm of his hand to its edge, thus spreading his coarse mouth and making the brutish face all one horrid leer.

There was a stir just behind him, a child's half-smothered exclamation of fear. Two little yellow-haired girls, whose white faces looked saint-like in the dim light, were clinging to an old mammy in sudden terror.

"Hush! hush!" came the response, reassuringly patting the younger girl. "Wos 'de matter, child?"

What a sweet old face it was, with its frame of white wool. The eyes looked out softly kind from beneath well-shaped brows. The features seemed to have been refined by suffering. They were more clear cut than the mulatto complexion would warrant one to expect. But her caresses were given absent-mindedly. She was absorbed in this evil-eyed stranger among the flock. He turned toward them when the child cried out and gave her a good view of his face. Upon her own was a strange mingling of grief and eager longing.

"Oh, Jim, my darling boy!" she murmured to herself; "dis couldn't be my Jim."

The older girl overheard. "Why, Mammy," slipping an arm around her, "of course that couldn't be Jim. Of course not," with an almost tearful insistence. "He is a wicked man; he has a bad face. Your Jim was a boy, a good, loving boy. You have always told us so, Mammy."

"Yais, honey, yais." There was a choking in Mammy's voice. "But he'd be a man now, and oh, I hate to think ob it so, but he might be a bad no-count man. I reckon 'twuz down folks what bought him, an' widout his mammy to hup him and raise him up to be good he might come to wickedness."

"Is he like your Jim, Mammy? What makes you think its Jim?" whispered the child, wretched that all the hopeful dreams which she shared with Mammy about the long-lost-for Jim should come to this unhappy end. How could Mammy's Jim be other than noble and true and good? And this coarse-faced disturber of the meeting, oh, no!

"Oh, chile, chile, I feel it in my soul. He looks lek him sunnow, do he look so bold and carles, an' dat sear on his cheek. I 'member de day he burned hisself dyar; 'twas a dreadful sor. O, he's lek Jim. I can't tell you how I knows, but I does know. If jos comes to me, yo can't 'twice a morder. But, oh! he's so diff'nt, so changed. Dey 'bused him an' med him ugly; he wuz so sperited an' so sensitive. But he tuk to new ways quick; he was a peart child, an' mighty easy to learn, an' children learn wickedness easier'n anything. But I can't chort 'er 'im 'tactly dis way. I reckoned he wud alus be kin' o' lokin' an' waitin' fur his mammy, an' glad to see mammy when we foun' each uther at las'; an' now I has foun' him lek dis, my po' Jim!"

Poor, patient-hearted Mammy was almost giving away.

"Oh, Mammy, don't, don't," pleaded the little girls. "Let's go home. Please take us home, Mammy."

"Yais, d'rectly, chilen, honies, but I mus' speak to Jim first. Jes yey wait a minit. 'Praps he'll know how mammy wen I speak to him."

"Oh, no, Mammy," cried the younger child, "don't speak to him, Mammy, I'm afraid, and perhaps it isn't Jim after all."

Mammy herself was trembling with a vague terror. She, too, was afraid he should be Jim—he was Jim—how could

she let him go without a word? She couldn't, her poor boy.

"Oh, Mammy, please do take us home."

"Yais, dearie, but not just yet; 'sides we wud 'sturb de meetin'. Listen, Brer Barrer's speakin' now."

In truth, the meeting had been in progress for sometime, but Mammy, usually so devoutly attentive, had not heard a word. The preacher had already aroused both himself and his hearers to the greatest fervor.

Loud "Hallelujahs" and "Amen's" from the congregation followed his exhortation. There were groans from some overcome by the sense of their sins and fervent "Praise de Lord" from others. The speaker was vigorously mopping the perspiration from his face, but paused occasionally to stretch out his hands in a breathless, silent plea to his people. Presently someone took up another song.

Then just as Mammy, seeing only Jim, thinking only of Jim, having recovered herself from the children, started forward to speak to the man, he rose, shrugged himself, as though shaking off the preacher's earnest, uncomfortable words, twitched down his hat and elbowed his way roughly through the crowd.

Mammy gave a little entreating cry, "Jim, my boy!"

The man, now at some distance, turned and pushed his hat back from his forehead with a quick look in her direction. What sweet voice from the dead past had called to him?

Mammy watched him in despair, the while she struggled nervously to loosen the grasp of the children who had again flung themselves upon her. Only an instant he waited, then frowned and passed on. Just at the edge of the crowd he stumbled over the outstretched limbs of a devout brother upon his knees before a bench. He recovered himself with a curse and kicked the prostrate man. The latter, ready in warfare as reverent in worship, sprang up, and, catching the angry glances of the other, promptly struck out at him. There was a scuffle, a few quick blows; then the stranger pulled backward by half a dozen hands, with a powerful effort flung off his opponents and passed quickly beyond the congregation out into the darkness. Oh! such darkness!

Poor Mammy, there was nothing left for her to do but take her little charges home, and then they hung about her in their childish sympathy and pleaded for her to spend the night and would not let her go. So Mammy, though feeling that she would rather be alone, yielded to her pets, as usual. The children climbed upon her lap and kissed the soft, wrinkled cheeks and patted the trembling hands. How strange it was to see quiet, cherry-hearted Mammy with such a despairing trouble in her eyes.

Yet it was no new thing for these to be her comforters, for Mammy's sorrow, though never before showing this hopeless bitterness, had been longer than their lives. Twenty years before, when Mammy's little son had been separated from her by sale, the children's grandfather, old Colonel Braddon, had bought her. His son and his son's children alike held in tender admiration Mammy's pure, patient, busy life. When her freedom came, Mammy had been provided for, preferring a plain little place of her own among the other negroes in Happy Hollow, although, probably, the greater part of her time was passed in her former master's home, the companion and confidante of his motherless children.

When the nurse came to take them away, they pleaded for Mammy to put them to bed. "Won't you, Mammy?" "Yes, darlin's," said Mammy, "but hurry, now, or yo'll not be up to see papa off to-morrow." And with one at each hand she passed out. Poor Mammy hardly saw these pale girls, scarcely realized their carresses. She felt a little brown hand cling to hers; she saw a dusky small face lifted toward her own; she heard a boy's voice call her "Mammy, dear."

Contrary to the prophecy, the children were up early next morning. As Mammy came down stairs, she heard Edith's voice in tones of horror: "And, papa, the paper says he broke into Mr. Pierce's house and Mr. Pierce woke up and they had a struggle and, oh, papa, he killed Mr. Pierce, he shot him. Isn't it awful, and Mr. Pierce was such a good, kind man and all the negroes loved him. And papa, it describes him, the murderer, and it must be that wicked looking man that was at the camp-meeting last night, the one Mammy thought was Jim. Oh! it can't be her Jim. It says the colored folks identified him as a fellow who made a disturbance at the meeting, and he is a stranger in town. Papa, I must be that man we saw. Poor Mammy! They have caught him and put him in jail and there was an awful mob at the jail after he was taken and they think he will be lynched. O, papa, what shall we do for Mammy? She was sure that man was her Jim. And such a terribly bad man!"

Poor Mammy sat now upon the lower stairs in the hall, utterly still, struck to the heart. Her Jim! A murderer! The little dark boyish hands were loosed from hers now; there were no more voices or visions from the past, but a man's coarse fingers seemed gripping her throat; a man's heavy tones and lowering brows were mocking her. She rose presently, still in a numbness of horror and dread, and slipped out silently. She went directly to the jail. Although so early, people were already gathered in little groups, excitedly talking of the murderer and bitterly denouncing the criminal. Mammy finally made her way through the crowd into the jail and asked to see the prisoner. The jailer expressed his astonishment and dismay at the request.

"Why, Mammy Braddon, you don't want to see that brute? What should bring a woman here? I'm mighty uneasy about that crowd of men down there; I think they mean mischief, though probably there will be no outbreak before night. You can't do him any good, Mammy, if your dear old heart does pity him. He's too far gone in evil doing."

"Oh, Mr. Dean," cried Mammy, "he's my son, my long lost boy. He is Jim! I saw him at de camp-meeting las' night, but I couldn't get to speak to him. Oh, please let me see my po' boy, I've got to speak to him dis time. If I cud only had foun' him las' night, den dis, dis—"

"There, there, Mammy, don't take on so. I can't believe it's possible, but mighty strange things come to light here. You shall see him by'n-by; it's too early now. It's against the rules to let visitors in before 10 o'clock and it isn't exactly regular for people to visit a murderer so soon after he is jailed, but I'll get you in. Come after a while, long about 11 and you shall see him. I hope you'll find you're wrong. He surely can't be your Jim."

Mammy went away without further parley. She would wait; hadn't she waited many, many years? But she knew it was Jim.

When the jailer went in to see his prisoner he began to question the man of his history, but was abruptly stopped.

"See here, old fellow, yo' needn't try to get anything out o' me. Yey want an interestin' paragra' for a paper, don't yey, after I'm strung up? Why d'nt yo, bring yey note book 'long?"

"No," said the jailer pityingly. "I'm sorry for you, after all, or rather I'm sorry for your poor old Mammy. There was a woman here a bit ago who says you're her son. She saw you at the camp-meeting last night; she tried to get to you but couldn't."

The man remembered that faint call that reached him, which he had concluded a delusion. A softened look lighted his hard features. All through his wicked and wanted life the memory of Mammy had gone with him. At first he had tried to find her; for years he had followed every clue, patiently, with utmost care, then, bitterly, hopelessly. It had all been given up long ago. He supposed her dead.

Little by little the jailer now got from him the story of liberty; the repressed bitterness of boyhood; the unrestrained dissipations of latter life; his hatred of the class that had robbed him of his mother; contempt of his fellows, as degraded and ignorant as himself; 'twas a brief thing to tell, the sorrowful story of the sin-stamped years. What he could remember of his early life coincided entirely with the history of Mammy and her boy, which was familiar to the jailer.

I pity your poor Mammy and I pity you too," said the jailer. "Her heart is just broken; she has looked for you so long and thought of you so much. But it'll be a good thing for you, as things are. It will help your case mightily and I don't mind telling you that your case will need some help. Everybody loves Mammy Braddon and they'll deal a little gentler with you for her sake. But it's hard on her; it's the very hardest thing there could be for right here where everybody knows her, as I said, and she so pious and good. It's worse than if she never found you."

The jailer was silenced by the sudden flaming of the murderer's eyes. Some wild thing seemed leaping into life within his mind. Why shouldn't he do this. Was he afraid? At last, he, whose one pride had been a contemptuous stoicism against the buffeting of any fate? A second, and it was all settled.

"Well, see 'neet fin' me. I'm not her Jim. I will not be her Jim, do she's my po' ole morder, dat's clear 'nuff. If I cud only see her, I member 'tactly how she looked do day dey tuk me from her, curse 'em! Luk yher, ole man, yo're not to let in a word o' wos I wos 'tely way. Next time I'll ask questions I'll hab a diff'nt story to tell, an' if yo' go to 'blabbin' about dis, I'll say yo're lyin'!"

The man turned his back to his companion. Could he hold to this? How he would like to find his mother! There was yet some one who cared for him. He remembered the touch of her arms as she clung to him before he was taken away. Oh! if he had found her yesterday, she might have saved him even from his degradation, but now it was too late. There is little more left for him anyway. He may save her this later, this misery.

"See here, my man, it's sort o' decent of you to try to save your Mammy from sorrow, but you'll give up that notion, if you value your skin, I tell you the town is wild over that murder, and someone is likely to put in a decision on your case without giving you a hearing. But if we let it out that you're Mammy Braddon's long lost boy, there's a right smart chance that'll quiet 'em. Everybody in town thinks a heap of Mammy, and has felt for her grief in not finding her boy since the war. I 'low it'd be a noble thing to do, but you're not in a position to do it."

"Shut up. Did yo' yher wat I said? I'm going to do yey dat."

"You can't do it. I tell you," dropping his voice to a whisper, "you'll be lynched, in my opinion. And that pretty quick. I must ask you for my sake, if not for your own, to give up that idea. I hate to have a prisoner taken from me. Everything is quiet now, tolerably, but I wouldn't be a bit surprised if they come after you to-night. Of course, I'll do the best I can for you, and I reckon the Sheriff intends to get you out of here, but he is so slow in getting started at anything. You better get under your mother's wing."

"Well yo' quit dat?" demanded the man angrily, with an oath. "I haint got any morder. D'yo yher?"

And then he threw himself heavily upon the floor, face downward, and the jailer went out and left him.

The court house clock struck 10. As Mammy came hurrying trembling

through the jail yard she saw, with a thankful heart, that the excited group had dispersed. The jailer conducted her at once to the prisoner's cell. The heavy door swung open. The man turned toward his visitors. Mammy, with a cry of helpless sorrow and hungry mother love, sprang forward with outstretched arms.

"Jim, my boy!"

A swift recognition lighted the man's face. He knew her instantly. How exactly that look of despairing grief was like the one he remembered when they had been forced apart. What a tenderness there was upon his own hard features! Was he giving way after all?

"Well, Mammy," how softly the words came from those harsh lips! "yo' mus' hab med some mistake. Wat's dis all about?"

"Oh! Jim, den, yo, know me, yo morder! Oh, my po' boy! yo mus' member me, wat's yo' Jim? I've changed o' course. Ise grown ole an' my heart is broke to see yo' lek dis, but yo' member how yey old morder looked, chile, don' yey? Sho yo'ose Jim, my long-lost Jim."

"Yais, I'm Jim, fur dat's my name, an' I'm los' like enuff. Ise been los' a good bit from ev'ing wuz wor' keepin' to, but I 'low Ise not yo' Jim. Yais, I member 'tactly how my morder look, an' yo' caint be har, 't'est yo're a ghos' 'sides—a struggling, harsh little laugh—'yo're not brack 'nuff, eben fur her ghos'. My ole morder look, Mammy, long ago. I seed her put in de ground. Yo's med a mistake sho."

"Oh! I caint brack yey," cried Mammy, "Something tells me yor my Jim, an' yo' is so lek him. Morder's eyes ain't gently ceived. An' dat sear on yo' face I member wen me boy got burned dar. Don' yo' recollect libin' in de big house wen yo' wuz little (dey was specially good to us), an' little white Esther wat wos so fond o' yo' an' use to play wid yo'; an' don' yo' member dat time wen ev'ing jes went to pieces an' yo' wuz sold away from me an' dey wuzn't buy me?"

In her eagerness her hand was on his arm, her face lifted close to his. How the man trembled!

"No, I don't member it, caze I tole yo' 'twant so. I neber wuz tuk away from my mammy. She died. An' dat sear, Ise shor yo' don' know nothin' 'bout dat, fur I got dat burn two yehs fo' de wah, fightin' a fire wen a burnin' head fell on my face. Yo'ae got lole de wrong felch, Mammy."

Mammy drew back slightly, still intently regarding him. There was disappointment in her face, but a blessed sense of relief in her heart. And yet she doubted.

"But look yher, Mammy, yo' say yor boy had a sear lek mine, an' yo' wuz tuk apart wen her wuz a little felch, say 'bout six yehs ole, an' yo' use 'blong to de Claytons?"

"Yey yey," gasped mammy.

"Well, den, I brack I use to know yo' Jim." And he went on hurriedly in response to the agony of petition in Mammy's face. "We got 'quainted in de wah. We wuz in de same reg'ment. He called himself Jim Clayton, caze he say he 'blong to de Claytons wen he wuz little, an' dat wuz de name he hed 'long o' his Mammy, so he tuk it agin wen he went to de fight. An' he hed a burn lek dis on h' jaw. Folks said 'twuz cur's how much we favored one 'noder. But we wuzn't 'fike, oder ways, fur he wuz a good boy an' I allus a sort o' no 'count nigger."

Old Mammy's face, the tenderness on it, the light in Mammy's soft dark eyes!

"But, Mammy," he went on more softly, "yo' mus' expect to fin' him. Yo' wuz ober see yor Jim in dis war?" How tenderly he was trying to tell it!

"He died, Mammy. But he used to hope o' fin' his Mammy wen de wah was ober an' he talk so much 'bout yo'. He tole me ev'ing; we wuz fas' frens. But he didn't lib to see de wah ober. He died fightin' fur freedom."

"Twos mos, de las' batt'le o' de wah. Dey turn us out o' camp arly in de mawnin'. De enemy dey hed mek a peart stan on a hill fo' our face an' eyes. We wuz twice ez many ez dem, an' we reckon it gwine be easy, sho 'nuff, but lo' how dese critters done fit! We brack deir lines at las' an' we hoe-squar 'th' em, an' wat yo' tink? Doze fellows 'ey torn right roun' in dey tracks an' pitch into us agen. Dey wuz grity. I felt lek ch'rin, 'em. But Jim—me wuz side an' side—'he wuz ter in-right to business, an' jes mekin' he muskit dance from one en' to nder, he lead an' fire dat fas'. But pr'er soon his gun tumbled right out on my feet an' I see him drap. An' den I pick him up an' kyar him back ur more proper ferreds from whar we were, fur we hed done good straight ober dat hill tude de oder lines, an' dar dey wuz mosly at de top o' de hill agen, but mighty few dar wuz ob 'em an' our front hed switch roun' an' tackle 'em. I toled him off to one side, fur de fightin' wuz jes 'bout ober, an' he only lib a few minits, but hey las' words wuz deat hey Mammy, an' he said 'praps dis will gib my Mammy her freedom, wharev' she is deat Mammy, an' ben he wuz gone."

Mammy was a thing, but O, what a thing! Tears! In a moment she was in her hands to the man's shoulders and compelled his look towards hers. Was there still a shadow of disbelief? No, that had all vanished in a flood of fond memories. "You actin' do favor my Jim," she murmured.

Presently she lifted her hands higher and laid one against either cheek and drew them down, with a slow caress, until the left one concealed that great discolored scar. The man put up his own unsteadily and covered hers and held them there. But for the bitter tutelage of long, long years when the dry soul had wept dust, tears must have come now.

The door opened and the jailer entered.

"I reckon you'll have to go now Mammy."

"Mus' I go? I'd lek to yher mo' o' my boy. Dis yher ain't my Jim, but he done tole me 'bout Jim. Dey use to know each uther, an' Jim wuz a good boy an' lubbed his mammy allus an' he died in de wah."

She turned again to the prisoner.

"O, I 'tunk yey so fur tellin' me dis. It hurts me dat I caint cher 'sides to see him here, but Ise proud o' him now, an' I can stan' it fur de little while wats lef. An' yo' wuz his fren. I wish I cud do somethin' fur yey. I'll try to do somethin' fur yey. I'll tell 'em how good yo' wuz to Jim an' me an' I'll beg 'em to gib yo' nurrer chance. Won't yo' try to do better? Won't yo' fur my sake, jes ez if I wuz yo' po' ole heart-broken mammy?"

"Dar, dar, don't greebe; I'll try, ef I do get nurrer chance, but dat isn't yey lucky. I reckon dey'll fix me dis time. Dar, don't cry; praps I'll get out o' it somehow. Ise ben in a good meny scrapes fo' dis an' come off son'. Nebber min' me."

"Come Mammy," said the jailer, and he led her, sobbing away.

The prisoner stood entirely still, looking toward the door, long after she had gone. He pressed his hands upon his face, there where hers had been.

"She'll neber know de dif'nce bress her, till she gets to heaven. An' I hope dey'll mek' her happy dar in spite on it. I reckon I did right wud wat dat story, but somehow it come mighty hard to lie to her."

Was it all a lie? There were those who could have told her that the real Jim's daring courage in battle was no myth, and that brief narrative of a bloody contest no fairy tale.

Mammy sat alone at midnight in her little home. She had no lamp, but the moonlight, shifting dimly through the uncertain clouds, fell into the small, plain room. She had been crying a little, softly and tenderly. But, oh! how proud she was of the memory of her boy, and what a sweet repose there was upon the serene old face!

The moon was behind a cloud. She went and stood at the window, lifting her face toward the distant sky and thanking God. By and by she thought she heard voices and footsteps. Suddenly the moon came out clearly and showed a strange procession that had already passed the house, a hurrying, business-like crowd, but weirdly still and mysterious in the night's silence. Mammy watched them for a moment, terrified and quiet. Then, breathless with dread, she started to the door. But the moon was gone again, and all was dark. Mammy trembled as the shifting winds struck her face. Could it be they had taken out the murderer? But, no, surely not; everything had been quiet in the town during the day. The first anger and commotion over the crime had subsided. No, it was quite improbable; she would not worry. It was perhaps some crowd of tired out merry-makers. And Mammy went back into the little room and stood at the window and looked out into the quiet dark and prayed.

The gruesome procession halted at a wooded place on the outskirts of the town. There were hasty, horrible preparations.

"Now, nigger," said the determined voice of one of the leaders, "if you've got anything you want to say, we'll hear you for five minutes."

The negro shook his head. He could not trust himself to speak. He was fighting down a desperate impulse to cry out his secret, to beg them to be merciful for Mammy's sake; not to take his life. He made a gesture for them to hurry. Oh! if they waited five minutes, he must give way. How dear his life, this miserable thing that he loathed and scorned, how dear to him after all!

"Well, then, fellows, all ready," cried a voice.

One moment more he stood, inflexible and unrepentant in the face of this brutal death, but true to the last to his poor, untaught idea of honor and filial loyalty, and then the body of Mammy's Jim swung up and out to the shuddering air.

As Mammy still stood at the window, with that shining peace upon her face, and prayed.

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