

HIS MOURNING-DAY.

"Why do you always go away Christmas-eve, Uncle Percy, and not come back until the day after Christmas?"

"I'd rather not tell you now, my puss," replied the old man. "If I am alive when you have grown to be a woman, I may perhaps tell you then."

"But you may get killed before the year is over, and then I'll never know," little Ola persisted.

"No," he said; "no such good fortune."

His queerly-worded prophecy proved true. As commander of a flag-ship in a squadron he served through the Civil War, and escaped without a scratch.

His nephews and nieces grew up to have homes and children of their own, and in each of their homes and their hearts was always a warm corner for their uncle Percy. He was known to be rich. His birthday remembrances were always of a costly nature. But he never paid the slightest attention to Christmas.

Twenty-five years after the conversation he had held with his grandniece regarding his peculiar habit at Christmas-time, while he was making her his accustomed annual visit, he was stricken ill and obliged to remain her guest over Christmas. She had grown to be a handsome matron, and had three as beautiful children as one could rest an eye upon.

On Christmas morning the tiny trio burst into the room where the old man was bolstered up in bed. His wavy, snow-white hair and beard framed a swarthy, well-tanned face that, contrary to its usually pleasant expression, had become stern and forbidding. As the little cherubs innocently shouted forth their loving greeting, "Merwy Twismas, Untle Pusey!" he uttered a groan, and sank back with closed eyes on the cherry cushions.

"Mamma! mamma! Tum twick! Unky's sick!" cried the youngest, Ola, in deep concern, to her mother.

"Uncle, dear, what is the matter? Can I do anything for you?" asked their mother, a moment later.

"No, nothing, but keep the children away from me. I cannot enjoy their company to-day," he replied, as he turned his face to the wall.

"Uncle," queried their mother, when the door closed behind the children, "why you say Christmas is your mourning-day, and why have you always refused invitations to spend the day with your relatives?"

"Don't ask me, Ola; it is a long story, and had best never be told."

"Yes, I shall ask you. And furthermore, I shall remind you of your promise to me, when I was a little girl, to tell me, if you were alive when I had grown to womanhood, why it was you always went away the night before Christmas and no one ever saw you until the day after it."

"I don't mind who knows of it, Ola, after I am dead; but I cannot look any one in the face, feeling that they know my story. I have kept the secret fifty-five years, and it would be a great relief to me to tell it to some one if I thought such a friend could respect me afterward. I have always felt that you loved me for myself alone, and not because you were born my relative, and trained, as so many children are, to treat me with the feigned affection that custom sanctions as the duty of one relative to another, when true regard is really absent."

"Oh, uncle, I couldn't do such a thing! You know yourself, if I dislike any one, I am far too prompt in showing it to be a fact."

"That is a trait you inherited from your grandfather, who was a very fiery, quick-tempered man, prone to his likes and dislikes with an impetuosity that caused most men to look upon him as an unpleasant acquaintance. We were brought up to regard each other as cousins, and, as far as I know, he thought I was his cousin on his dying day. He was killed at Antietam. You were too young to recollect about it."

"Oh, no, uncle; I remember it well."

"He fought for the Confederate's side, in the infantry, and I was in the Union Army. He was the innocent cause of the blight on my life, or, at least, he precipitated, in a round-about way, an accident that brought the knowledge of a fact to my mind that I would rather have died than known."

"During my younger years, my uncle, our great-grandfather, used to tell me of my father, who, he said, was a vatesman, and had lost his life at sea. He said he had promised my father that, in case of his death, I should be brought up the same as his—my uncle's—own son; up to the hour I saw him last, he was faithful to the promise he said he had made to my father. As children, he made no distinction in the treatment of me and his son Raoul. Although we were as different in appearance as any two relatives could well be, there was an indescribable resemblance to each other that caused many to ask of either of us if we were brothers. Raoul was a tall, flaxen-haired lad; I was swarthy-checked, with short, curly, raven locks, and fully a head shorter than my cousin. We were devoted to each other during our younger years, and did everything we could to add each other's happiness. At school I was the better scholar because I really loved my studies; and Raoul, who was

rather a lazy student, was obliged to have me coach him along until his senior year, when he seemed to evince a sudden interest in his studies, and developed latent talents entirely unlooked for. He shot himself to the head of the class and graduated as its valedictorian, as well as winning the first prize for original metre. When we left college he entered a lawyer's office to study for the Bar. I had evinced an aptitude for the acquirement of foreign languages; so I continued their study with the idea of some time securing a professorship in a college. Raoul was writing rhythm most of the time instead of law-briefs. Up to this time we had never exchanged a cross word with each other; in fact, we never quarrelled in our lives; but we struck against the snag that has so often divided devoted friends, and even brothers—a beautiful woman.

"Yes, beautiful and noble. She was your grandmother. She was the embodiment of all that is good and pure, modest and unassuming; yet possessed of rare talents, and as highly accomplished a lady as one could hope to meet within the most refined circles of polite society. It is almost useless to say I fell madly in love with her. She enraptured my whole soul. My every thought was of her. My mind sought hers by day and by night. My least wish was for her happiness. When my hand touched hers, it thrilled my whole being, and rendered me happy through the remembrance of the fact. In truth, I lived only for her. At last the blow fell that nearly cost me my reason, and caused me to hate my cousin Raoul. One night he came into my room with his face flushed, and the happiest expression on it that I ever saw upon the face of any human being.

"My dear Percy," he said, "congratulate me. I have won the dearest, sweetest lady in Virginia. Evelynne St. Pierre has promised to be my wife."

"Had he thrust a knife into my bosom, I do not believe the pain I experienced could have been more acute. As I looked up the mirror pictured my bloodless countenance with an expression that told to me how I would look when I grew to be aged. As soon as I could control my emotion and trust my voice, I extended my hand to my cousin, and said:

"Raoul, you are worthy of her, and I hope you will be happy."

"I meant what I said, and I made up my mind to master my disappointment; but it was impossible. I could not govern my passion; it controlled me. I prayed oh, how earnestly!—for relief. I prayed for death. I prayed for anything to happen that would purge my soul of the covetous feeling I entertained toward my cousin's fiancée. But all to no purpose. A demon seemed to possess me, and everything I said and did appeared to be at its dictation. I became a smooth, polished hypocrite. I cultivated an unnaturally calm exterior, concealing the true condition of my mind, the riotous state of the soul within me. So sweetly did Evelynne smile upon me when we met, that I was fain to believe she would have favored my addresses were not Raoul between us. I deluded myself with the hallucination until I came to believe it as a truth, and cursed my fair-haired, poetical cousin with a fierceness that would have annihilated him had words the power to kill. I brooded until I became a monomaniac, with but one idea—that of bringing about a severance of the engagement between Raoul and Miss St. Pierre. How to accomplish it was the question. I dared not proceed about it openly. If I invoked him in a duel with me, it would avail me nothing; for no woman of her stamp would condescend to marry a man who had taken the life of her affianced husband. Therefore I must succeed by other means. How?—how?—how? My very footsteps seemed to ring out this query night and day. I slept but little—merely short, feverish naps, walking the floor between-times. I meditated no bodily harm to my cousin and I intended to do him no wrong, for I believed it to be best for for all concerned that they should part."

"After a little while, Raoul dropped back into his old dissipated, roystering ways, and she, poor girl! was neglected, save by an occasional sonnet dashed off during some of the lucid intervals in his maudlin carousings. She seemed to look to me for sympathy, but I never spoke of Raoul and his habits, and she never asked regarding him. I doubt if I would have betrayed him if she had. Sometimes I believed she knew all about him, and preferred to remain silent. Instead of dampening the embers of passion that smouldered in my heart, her silent ways, never complaining of my villainous cousin's neglect, fanned the sparks to life with renewed vigor. I longed to speak my sympathy for his indifference, and I know not what held my tongue in check or how I was prevented from betraying myself in her presence."

"In this manner the days passed until Yule-tide. I believe you have enjoyed several Christmas Days on the old plantation?"

"Yes, uncle, and I always used to miss you so much!" murmured Ola.

"Well, you know what a demonstration the darkies make over their appreciation of Christmas Day. It is their gala time, and during the week preceding it they are busy making preparations for it. My uncle gave me a list of things, calicoes and knickknacks, that he wished

me to order in Norfolk, which was a little over a twenty-mile ride from the part of Suffolk where our plantations lay. As I started on my journey, Colonel St. Pierre handed me a letter from Evelynne for Raoul, who spent most of his time playing billiards with Norfolk sharps, who found him easy game to pluck. I delivered the letter to him on a hotel-piazza, where he sat, flushed with wine, amid a group of bibulous comrades. He read it, then turned to me, and said:

"Tell her, if you see her before I get back, that I will come. She wishes me to help her with the festivities, at her father's plantation on Christmas-eve. You know they all come over to our place Christmas night."

"I told him I would deliver his answer, and did so on my return."

"I presume you know that colored people are a race very superstitious, and they believe that to some of their number—usually those who have been either princes or princesses of tribes in African lands—is given the power to foretell the future and disburse good or bad luck to the wenches and swains according to their will and pleasure. On your great-grandfather's plantation was such a person. She was almost as white as you are, dear, and the most beautiful being with colored blood in her veins that I ever saw. Contrary to what one would expect to find in a woman in her state at that time—for she was a slave—she was highly intellectual, and far brighter-minded than many white women. She could converse fluently in several foreign languages, and could read and write them as well. Such accomplishments were unusual in a slave, and to only a few were they known. She lived in a little cabin by herself at the foot of a hill but a short distance from the house, and her master, who apparently stood as much in awe of her as any of the field-hands on his tobacco plantation, allowed her to do much as she pleased. Raoul had become a confirmed gambler, and was as superstitious as any darky that ever breathed. Many a time I knew of his making a visit to 'Old Maumie Tegga,' as she was called, to 'get luck' with which to win at cards."

"Christmas-eve I walked the knoll in the moonlight, where I had a full view of Maumie's cabin, and as I paced to and fro, between an old water-mill and a hedge skirting the pathway leading to the house, I thought I saw Raoul enter the cabin. Everyone belonging to our plantation had gone to Colonel St. Pierre's, and the melodious voices of the singers on the last load were wafted on the breeze to me from the road below. The sound maddened me. These darkies could stand in Evelynne St. Pierre's presence unmoved by any such fierce passions as ragged within me. Oh, why could I not govern myself and be calm likewise? Then I thought of Raoul and his carelessly tossing aside the treasure he had won, as if her love was a mere bauble, with which he could toy and play fast and loose at his pleasure."

"Why—why could I not have been favored with the love of such an angel?" I cried, in agony, as I cast myself on the frosty ground.

"How long I lay there I do not know. When I staggered to my feet, my brain was wild and frenzied. I have a dim recollection of having an idea that if I could prevent Raoul from keeping his promise to join her that evening she might lose her faith in him and renounce him forever. And, should she do so, I could honorably try to win her love."

"A large hoghead, filled with heavy stones that had been culled from the tobacco beds, stood half way down the knoll, all headed up, ready to be taken to the storehouse at the further end of the plantation. Raoul had just entered the cabin, not knowing that Maumie Tegga had, as I supposed, gone picnicking with the rest of the hands. The door of this cabin opened outward, and the windows were formed of single panes of glass not more than six by eight inches square. If I rolled the hoghead against the door, he would be fastened in there for the night."

I was a very strong, athletic young man then; but it took quite an effort to tip over the cask and roll it noiselessly down the bank.

"Who is there?" I heard a voice ask that I thought was Raoul's; then I slipped into the shadow of the cabin and followed the dry bed of the mill-stream that he might not recognize me in the moonlight. Soon I reached the mill-gate, over which I clambered, then started on a short cut for Colonel St. Pierre's. I had not gone far when I heard a rush of water, and on looking behind, I saw that the gate had sprung open, and the water from the pond was flowing into the basin at the foot of the knoll."

"I thought to myself, 'Good! It will be a yard deep around the cabin, and he will not venture out until the hands return and cause the water to escape through the second dam below.'"

But on reaching the St. Pierre plantation I received such a shock as I would not wish my worst enemy to experience."

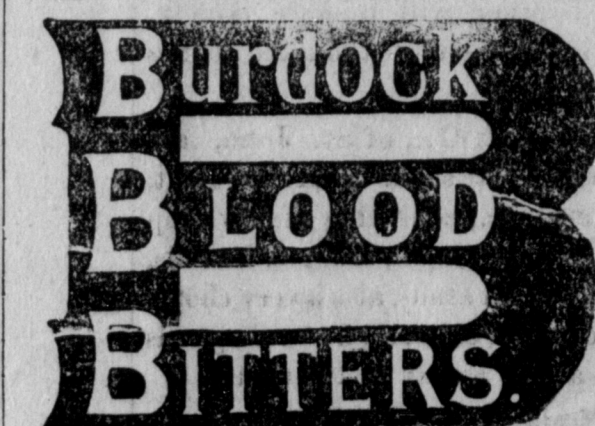
"Raoul was sitting upon the verandah, smoking a cigar and complacently watching two darkies dancing a breakdown, and urging an old, gray woolly-haired fiddler to 'keep her up,' although both the musician and the dancers were both dripping with perspiration, and scarcely able to move hand or foot. When they flagged, Raoul would instil new vigor into their

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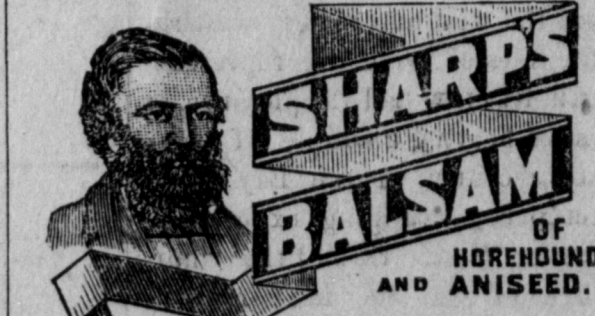
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