Bret Harte

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Bret Harte
Sally Dows and Other Stories

SALLY DOWS

PROLOGUE
THE LAST GUN AT SNAKE RIVER

What had been in the cool gray of that summer morning a dewy country lane, marked only by a few wagon tracks that never encroached upon its grassy border, and indented only by the faint footprints of a crossing fox or coon, was now, before high noon, already crushed, beaten down, and trampled out of all semblance of its former graciousness. The heavy springless jolt of gun-carriage and caisson had cut deeply through the middle track; the hoofs of crowding cavalry had struck down and shredded the wayside vines and bushes to bury them under a cloud of following dust, and the short, plunging double-quick of infantry had trodden out this hideous ruin into one dusty level chaos. Along that rudely widened highway useless muskets, torn accoutrements, knapsacks, caps, and articles of clothing were scattered, with here and there the larger wrecks of broken-down wagons, roughly thrown aside into the ditch to make way for the living current. For two hours the greater part of an army corps had passed and repassed that way, but, coming or going, always with faces turned eagerly towards an open slope on the right which ran parallel to the lane. And yet nothing was to be seen there. For two hours a gray and bluish cloud, rent and shaken with explosion after explosion, but always closing and thickening after each discharge, was all that had met their eyes. Nevertheless, into this ominous cloud solid moving masses of men in gray or blue had that morning melted away, or emerged from it only as scattered fragments that crept, crawled, ran, or clung together in groups, to be followed, and overtaken in the rolling vapor.

But for the last half hour the desolated track had stretched empty and deserted. While there was no cessation of the rattling, crackling, and detonations on the fateful slope beyond, it had still been silent. Once or twice it had been crossed by timid, hurrying wings, and frightened and hesitating little feet, or later by skulkers and stragglers from the main column who were tempted to enter it from the hedges and bushes where they had been creeping and hiding. Suddenly a prolonged yell from the hidden slope beyond—the nearest sound that had yet been heard from that ominous distance—sent them to cover again. It was followed by the furious galloping of horses in the lane, and a handsome, red-capped officer, accompanied by an orderly, dashed down the track, wheeled, leaped the hedge, rode out on the slope and halted. In another instant a cloud of dust came whirling down the lane after him. Out of it strained the heavy shoulders and tightened chain-traces of six frantic horses dragging the swaying gun that in this tempest of motion alone seemed passive and helpless with an awful foreknowledge of its power. As in obedience to a signal from the officer they crashed through the hedge after him, a sudden jolt threw an artilleryman from the limber before the wheel. A driver glanced back on the tense chain and hesitated. “Go on!” yelled the prostrate man, and the wheel went over him. Another and another gun followed out of the dust cloud, until the whole battery had deployed on the slope. Before the drifting dust had fairly settled, the falling back of the panting horses with their drivers gave a momentary glimpse of the nearest gun already in position and of the four erect figures beside it. The yell that seemed to have evoked this sudden apparition again sounded nearer; a blinding flash broke from the gun, which was instantly hidden by the closing group around it, and a deafening crash with the high ringing of metal ran down the lane. A column of white, woolly

smoke arose as another flash broke beside it. This was quickly followed by another and another, with a response from the gun first fired, until the whole slope shook and thundered. And the smoke, no longer white and woolly, but darkening and thickening as with unburnt grains of gunpowder, mingled into the one ominous vapor, and driving along the lane hid even the slope from view.

The yelling had ceased, but the grinding and rattling heard through the detonation of cannon came nearer still, and suddenly there was a shower of leaves and twigs from the lower branches of a chestnut-tree near the broken hedge. As the smoke thinned again a rising and falling medley of flapping hats, tossing horses' heads and shining steel appeared for an instant, advancing tumultuously up the slope. But the apparition was as instantly cloven by flame from the two nearest guns, and went down in a gush of smoke and roar of sound. So level was the delivery and so close the impact that a space seemed suddenly cleared between, in which the whirling of the shattered remnants of the charging cavalry was distinctly seen, and the shouts and oaths of the inextricably struggling mass became plain and articulate. Then a gunner serving the nearest piece suddenly dropped his swab and seized a carbine, for out of the whirling confusion before them a single rider was seen galloping furiously towards the gun.

The red-capped young officer rode forward and knocked up the gunner's weapon with his sword. For in that rapid glance he had seen that the rider's reins were hanging loosely on the neck of his horse, who was still dashing forwards with the frantic impetus of the charge, and that the youthful figure of the rider, wearing the stripes of a lieutenant,—although still erect, exercised no control over the animal. The face was boyish, blond, and ghastly; the eyes were set and glassy. It seemed as if Death itself were charging the gun.

Within a few feet of it the horse swerved before a brandished rammer, and striking the cheeks of the gun-carriage pitched his inanimate rider across the gun. The hot blood of the dead man smoked on the hotter brass with the reek of the shambles, and be-spattered the hand of the gunner who still mechanically served the vent. As they lifted the dead body down the order came to "cease firing." For the yells from below had ceased too; the rattling and grinding were receding with the smoke farther to the left. The ominous central cloud parted for a brief moment and showed the unexpected sun glittering down the slope upon a near and peaceful river.

The young artillery officer had dismounted and was now gently examining the dead man. His breast had been crushed by a fragment of shell; he must have died instantly. The same missile had cut the chain of a locket which slipped from his opened coat. The officer picked it up with a strange feeling—perhaps because he was conscious himself of wearing a similar one, perhaps because it might give him some clue to the man's identity. It contained only the photograph of a pretty girl, a tendril of fair hair, and the word "Sally." In the breast-pocket was a sealed letter with the inscription, "For Miss Sally Dows. To be delivered if I fall by the mudsill's hand." A faint smile came over the officer's face; he was about to hand the articles to a sergeant, but changed his mind and put them in his pocket.

Meantime the lane and woods beyond, and even the slope itself, were crowding with supports and waiting troops. His own battery was still unlimbered, waiting orders. There was a slight commotion in the lane.

"Very well done, captain. Smartly taken and gallantly held."

It was the voice of a general officer passing with his staff. There was a note of pleasant relief in its tone, and the middle-aged, care-drawn face of its owner was relaxed in a paternal smile. The young captain flushed with pleasure.

"And you seem to have had close work too," added the general, pointing to the dead man.

The young officer hurriedly explained. The general nodded, saluted, and passed on. But a youthful aide airily lingered.

“The old man’s feeling good, Courtland,” he said. “We’ve rolled ‘em up all along the line. It’s all over now. In point of fact, I reckon you’ve fired the last round in this particular fratricidal engagement.”

The last round! Courtland remained silent, looking abstractedly at the man it had crushed and broken at his feet.

“And I shouldn’t wonder if you got your gold-leaf for to-day’s work. But who’s your sunny Southern friend here?” he added, following his companion’s eyes.

Courtland repeated his story a little more seriously, which, however, failed to subdue the young aide’s levity. “So he concluded to stop over,” he interrupted cheerfully. “But,” looking at the letter and photograph, “I say—look here! ‘Sally Dows?’ Why, there was another man picked up yesterday with a letter to the same girl! Doc Murphy has it. And, by Jove! the same picture too!—eh? I say, Sally must have gathered in the boys, and raked down the whole pile! Look here, Courty! you might get Doc Murphy’s letter and hunt her up when this cruel war is over. Say you’re ‘fulfilling a sacred trust!’ See? Good idea, old man! Ta-ta!” and he trotted quickly after his superior.

Courtland remained with the letter and photograph in his hand, gazing abstractedly after him. The smoke had rolled quite away from the fields on the left, but still hung heavily down the south on the heels of the flying cavalry. A long bugle call swelled up musically from below. The freed sun caught the white flags of two field hospitals in the woods and glanced tranquilly on the broad, cypress-fringed, lazy-flowing, and cruel but beautiful Southern river, which had all unseen crept so smilingly that morning through the very heart of the battle.

CHAPTER I

The two o'clock express from Redlands to Forestville, Georgia, had been proceeding with the languid placidity of the river whose banks it skirted for more than two hours. But, unlike the river, it had stopped frequently; sometimes at recognized stations and villages, sometimes at the apparition of straw-hatted and linen-coated natives in the solitude of pine woods, where, after a decent interval of cheery conversation with the conductor and engineer, it either took the stranger on board, or relieved him of his parcel, letter, basket, or even the verbal message with which he was charged. Much of the way lay through pine-barren and swampy woods which had never been cleared or cultivated; much through decayed settlements and ruined villages that had remained unchanged since the War of the Rebellion, now three years past. There were vestiges of the severity of a former military occupation; the blackened timbers of railway bridges still unrepaired; and along the line of a certain memorable march, sections of iron rails taken from the torn-up track, roasted in bonfires and bent while red-hot around the trunks of trees, were still to be seen. These mementos of defeat seemed to excite neither revenge nor the energy to remove them; the dull apathy which had succeeded the days of hysterical passion and convulsion still lingered; even the slow improvement that could be detected was marked by the languor of convalescence. The helplessness of a race, hitherto dependent upon certain barbaric conditions or political place and power, unskilled in invention, and suddenly confronted with the necessity of personal labor, was visible everywhere. Eyes that but three short years before had turned vindictively to the North, now gazed wistfully to that quarter for help and direction. They scanned eagerly the faces of their energetic and prosperous neighbors—and quondam foes—upon the verandas of Southern hotels and the decks of Southern steamboats, and were even now watching from a group in the woods the windows of the halted train, where the faces appeared of two men of manifestly different types, but still alien to the country in dress, features, and accent.

Two negroes were slowly loading the engine tender from a woodpile. The rich brown smoke of the turpentine knots was filling the train with its stinging fragrance. The elder of the two Northern passengers, with sharp New England angles in his face, impatiently glanced at his watch.

"Of all created shiftlessness, this beats everything! Why couldn't we have taken in enough wood to last the ten miles farther to the terminus when we last stopped? And why in thunder, with all this firing up, can't we go faster?"

The younger passenger, whose quiet, well-bred face seemed to indicate more discipline of character, smiled.

"If you really wish to know and as we've only ten miles farther to go—I'll show you WHY. Come with me."

He led the way through the car to the platform and leaped down. Then he pointed significantly to the rails below them. His companion started. The metal was scaling off in thin strips from the rails, and in some places its thickness had been reduced a quarter of an inch, while in others the projecting edges were torn off, or hanging in iron shreds, so that the wheels actually ran on the narrow central strip. It seemed marvelous that the train could keep the track.

"NOW you know why we don't go more than five miles an hour, and—are thankful that we don't," said the young traveler quietly.

"But this is disgraceful!—criminal!" ejaculated the other nervously.

"Not at their rate of speed," returned the younger man. "The crime would be in going faster. And now you can understand why a good deal of the other progress in this State is obliged to go as slowly over their equally decaying and rotten foundations. You can't rush things here as we do in the North."

The other passenger shrugged his shoulders as they remounted the platform, and the train moved on. It was not the first time that the two fellow-travelers had differed, although their mission

was a common one. The elder, Mr. Cyrus Drummond, was the vice-president of a large Northern land and mill company, which had bought extensive tracts of land in Georgia, and the younger, Colonel Courtland, was the consulting surveyor and engineer for the company. Drummond's opinions were a good deal affected by sectional prejudice, and a self-satisfied and righteous ignorance of the actual conditions and limitations of the people with whom he was to deal; while the younger man, who had served through the war with distinction, retained a soldier's respect and esteem for his late antagonists, with a conscientious and thoughtful observation of their character. Although he had resigned from the army, the fact that he had previously graduated at West Point with high honors had given him preferment in this technical appointment, and his knowledge of the country and its people made him a valuable counselor. And it was a fact that the country people had preferred this soldier with whom they had once personally grappled to the capitalist they had never known during the struggle.

The train rolled slowly through the woods, so slowly that the fragrant pine smoke from the engine still hung round the windows of the cars. Gradually the "clearings" became larger; they saw the distant white wooden colonnades of some planter's house, looking still opulent and pretentious, although the fence of its inclosure had broken gaps, and the gate sagged on its single hinge.

Mr. Drummond sniffed at this damning record of neglect and indifference. "Even if they were ruined, they might still have spent a few cents for nails and slats to enable them to look decent before folks, and not parade their poverty before their neighbors," he said.

"But that's just where you misunderstand them, Drummond," said Courtland, smiling. "They have no reason to keep up an attitude towards their neighbors, who still know them as 'Squire' so-and-so, 'Colonel' this and that, and the 'Judge,'—owners of their vast but crippled estates. They are not ashamed of being poor, which is an accident."

"But they are of working, which is DELIBERATION," interrupted Drummond. "They are ashamed to mend their fences themselves, now that they have no slaves to do it for them."

"I doubt very much if some of them know how to drive a nail, for the matter of that," said Courtland, still good-humoredly, "but that's the fault of a system older than themselves, which the founders of the Republic retained. We cannot give them experience in their new condition in one day, and in fact, Drummond, I am very much afraid that for our purposes—and I honestly believe for THEIR good—we must help to keep them for the present as they are."

"Perhaps," said Drummond sarcastically, "you would like to reinstate slavery?"

"No. But I should like to reinstate the MASTER. And not for HIS sake alone, but for freedom's sake and OURS. To be plain: since I have taken up this matter for the company, I have satisfied myself from personal observation that the negro—even more than his master—cannot handle his new condition. He is accustomed to his old traditional task-master, and I doubt if he will work fairly for any other—particularly for those who don't understand him. Don't mistake me: I don't propose to go back to the whip; to that brutal institution, the irresponsible overseer; to the buying and selling, and separation of the family, nor any of the old wrongs; but I propose to make the old master OUR OVERSEER, and responsible to US. He is not a fool, and has already learned that it is more profitable to pay wages to his old slaves and have the power of dismissal, like any other employer, than be obliged, under the old system of enforced labor and life servitude, to undergo the cost of maintaining incompetence and idleness. The old sentiment of slave-owning has disappeared before natural common-sense and selfishness. I am satisfied that by some such process as this utilizing of the old master and the new freedom we will be better able to cultivate our lands than by buying up their estates, and setting the old owners adrift, with a little money in their pockets, as an idle, discontented class to revive old political dogmas, and foment new issues, or perhaps set up a dangerous opposition to us.

"You don't mean to say that those infernal niggers would give the preference to their old oppressors?"

"Dollar for dollar in wages—yes! And why shouldn't they? Their old masters understand them better—and treat them generally better. They know our interest in them is only an abstract sentiment, not a real liking. We show it at every turn. But we are nearing Redlands, and Major Reed will, I have no doubt, corroborate my impressions. He insists upon our staying at his house, although the poor old fellow, I imagine, can ill afford to entertain company. But he will be offended if we refuse."

"He is a friend of yours, then?" asked Drummond.

"I fought against his division at Stony Creek," said Courtland grimly. "He never tires of talking of it to me—so I suppose I am."

A few moments later the train glided beside the Redlands platform. As the two travelers descended a hand was laid on Courtland's shoulder, and a stout figure in the blackest and shiniest of alpaca jackets, and the whitest and broadest of Panama hats, welcomed him. "Glad to see yo', cun'nel. I reckoned I'd waltz over and bring along the boy," pointing to a grizzled negro servant of sixty who was bowing before them, "to tote yo'r things over instead of using a hack. I haven't run much on horseflesh since the wah—ha! ha! What I didn't use up for remounts I reckon yo'r commissary gobbled up with the other live stock, eh?" He laughed heartily, as if the recollections were purely humorous, and again clapped Courtland on the back.

"Let me introduce my friend, Mr. Drummond, Major Reed," said Courtland, smiling.

"Yo' were in the wah, sir?"

"No—I"—returned Drummond, hesitating, he knew not why, and angry at his own embarrassment.

"Mr. Drummond, the vice-president of the company," interposed Courtland cheerfully, "was engaged in furnishing to us the sinews of war."

Major Reed bowed a little more formally. "Most of us heah, sir, were in the wah some time or other, and if you gentlemen will honah me by joining in a social glass at the hotel across the way, I'll introduce you to Captain Prendergast, who left a leg at Fair Oaks." Drummond would have declined, but a significant pressure on his arm from Courtland changed his determination. He followed them to the hotel and into the presence of the one-legged warrior (who turned out to be the landlord and barkeeper), to whom Courtland was hilariously introduced by Major Reed as "the man, sir, who had pounded my division for three hours at Stony Creek!"

Major Reed's house was but a few minutes' walk down the dusty lane, and was presently heralded by the baying of three or four foxhounds and foreshadowed by a dilapidated condition of picket-fence and stuccoed gate front. Beyond it stretched the wooden Doric columns of the usual Southern mansion, dimly seen through the broad leaves of the horse-chestnut-trees that shaded it. There were the usual listless black shadows haunting the veranda and outer offices—former slaves and still attached house-servants, arrested like lizards in breathless attitudes at the approach of strange footsteps, and still holding the brush, broom, duster, or home implement they had been lazily using, in their fixed hands. From the doorway of the detached kitchen, connected by a gallery to the wing of the mansion, "Aunt Martha," the cook, gazed also, with a saucepan clasped to her bosom, and her revolving hand with the scrubbing cloth in it apparently stopped on a dead centre.

Drummond, whose gorge had risen at these evidences of hopeless incapacity and utter shiftlessness, was not relieved by the presence of Mrs. Reed—a soured, disappointed woman of forty, who still carried in her small dark eyes and thin handsome lips something of the bitterness and antagonism of the typical "Southern rights" woman; nor of her two daughters, Octavia and Augusta, whose languid atrabiliousness seemed a part of the mourning they still wore. The optimistic gallantry and good fellowship of the major appeared the more remarkable by contrast with his cypress-shadowed family and their venomous possibilities. Perhaps there might have been a light vein of Southern insincerity in his good humor. "Paw," said Miss Octavia, with gloomy confidence to Courtland, but with a pretty curl of the hereditary lip, "is about the only 'reconstructed' one of the entire family. We don't make 'em much about yer. But I'd advise yo' friend, Mr. Drummond, if he's

coming here carpet-bagging, not to trust too much to paw's 'reconstruction.' It won't wash." But when Courtland hastened to assure her that Drummond was not a "carpet-bagger," was not only free from any of the political intrigue implied under that baleful title, but was a wealthy Northern capitalist simply seeking investment, the young lady was scarcely more hopeful. "I suppose he reckons to pay paw for those niggers yo' stole?" she suggested with gloomy sarcasm.

"No," said Courtland, smiling; "but what if he reckoned to pay those niggers for working for your father and him?"

"If paw is going into trading business with him; if Major Reed—a So'th'n gentleman—is going to keep shop, he ain't such a fool as to believe niggers will work when they ain't obliged to. THAT'S been tried over at Mirandy Dows's, not five miles from here, and the niggers are half the time hangin' round here takin' holiday. She put up new quarters for 'em, and tried to make 'em eat together at a long table like those low-down folks up North, and did away with their cabins and their melon patches, and allowed it would get 'em out of lying round too much, and wanted 'em to work over-time and get mo' pay. And the result was that she and her niece, and a lot of poor whites, Irish and Scotch, that she had to pick up "long the river,' do all the work. And her niece Sally was mo' than half Union woman during the wah, and up to all No'th'n tricks and dodges, and swearin' by them; and yet, for all that—the thing won't work."

"But isn't that partly the reason? Isn't her failure a great deal due to this lack of sympathy from her neighbors? Discontent is easily sown, and the negro is still weighted down by superstition; the Fifteenth Amendment did not quite knock off ALL his chains."

"Yes, but that is nothing to HER. For if there ever was a person in this world who reckoned she was just born to manage everything and everybody, it is Sally Dows!"

"Sally Dows!" repeated Courtland, with a slight start.

"Yes, Sally Dows, of Pineville."

"You say she was half Union, but did she have any relations or—or—friends—in the war—on your side? Any—who—were killed in battle?"

"They were all killed, I reckon," returned Miss Reed darkly. "There was her cousin, Jule Jeffcourt, shot in the cemetery with her beau, who, they say, was Sally's too; there were Chet Brooks and Joyce Masterton, who were both gone on her and both killed too; and there was old Captain Dows himself, who never lifted his head again after Richmond was taken, and drank himself to death. It wasn't considered healthy to be Miss Sally's relations in those times, or to be even wantin' to be one."

Colonel Courtland did not reply. The face of the dead young officer coming towards him out of the blue smoke rose as vividly as on that memorable day. The picture and letter he had taken from the dead man's breast, which he had retained ever since; the romantic and fruitless quest he had made for the fair original in after days; and the strange and fateful interest in her which had grown up in his heart since then, he now knew had only been lulled to sleep in the busy preoccupation of the last six months, for it all came back to him with redoubled force. His present mission and its practical object, his honest zeal in its pursuit, and the cautious skill and experience he had brought to it, all seemed to be suddenly displaced by this romantic and unreal fantasy. Oddly enough it appeared now to be the only reality in his life, the rest was an incoherent, purposeless dream.

"Is—is—Miss Sally married?" he asked, collecting himself with an effort.

"Married? Yes, to that farm of her aunt's! I reckon that's the only thing she cares for."

Courtland looked up, recovering his usual cheerful calm. "Well, I think that after luncheon I'll pay my respects to her family. From what you have just told me the farm is certainly an experiment worth seeing. I suppose your father will have no objection to give me a letter to Miss Dows?"

CHAPTER II

Nevertheless, as Colonel Courtland rode deliberately towards Dows' Folly, as the new experiment was locally called, although he had not abated his romantic enthusiasm in the least, he was not sorry that he was able to visit it under a practical pretext. It was rather late now to seek out Miss Sally Dows with the avowed intent of bringing her a letter from an admirer who had been dead three years, and whose memory she had probably buried. Neither was it tactful to recall a sentiment which might have been a weakness of which she was ashamed. Yet, clear-headed and logical as Courtland was in his ordinary affairs, he was nevertheless not entirely free from that peculiar superstition which surrounds every man's romance. He believed there was something more than a mere coincidence in his unexpectedly finding himself in such favorable conditions for making her acquaintance. For the rest—if there was any rest—he would simply trust to fate. And so, believing himself a cool, sagacious reasoner, but being actually, as far as Miss Dows was concerned, as blind, fatuous, and unreasoning as any of her previous admirers, he rode complacently forward until he reached the lane that led to the Dows plantation.

Here a better kept roadway and fence, whose careful repair would have delighted Drummond, seemed to augur well for the new enterprise. Presently, even the old-fashioned local form of the fence, a slanting zigzag, gave way to the more direct line of post and rail in the Northern fashion. Beyond it presently appeared a long low frontage of modern buildings which, to Courtland's surprise, were entirely new in structure and design. There was no reminiscence of the usual Southern porticoed gable or columned veranda. Yet it was not Northern either. The factory-like outline of facade was partly hidden in Cherokee rose and jessamine.

A long roofed gallery connected the buildings and became a veranda to one. A broad, well-rolled gravel drive led from the open gate to the newest building, which seemed to be the office; a smaller path diverged from it to the corner house, which, despite its severe simplicity, had a more residential appearance. Unlike Reed's house, there were no lounging servants or field hands to be seen; they were evidently attending to their respective duties. Dismounting, Courtland tied his horse to a post at the office door and took the smaller path to the corner house.

The door was open to the fragrant afternoon breeze wafted through the rose and jessamine. So also was a side door opening from the hall into a long parlor or sitting-room that ran the whole width of the house. Courtland entered it. It was prettily furnished, but everything had the air of freshness and of being uncharacteristically new. It was empty, but a faint hammering was audible on the rear wall of the house, through the two open French windows at the back, curtained with trailing vines, which gave upon a sunlit courtyard. Courtland walked to the window. Just before it, on the ground, stood a small light ladder, which he gently put aside to gain a better view of the courtyard as he put on his hat, and stepped out of the open window.

In this attitude he suddenly felt his hat tipped from his head, followed almost instantaneously by a falling slipper, and the distinct impression of a very small foot on the crown of his head. An indescribable sensation passed over him. He hurriedly stepped back into the room, just as a small striped-stockinged foot was as hastily drawn up above the top of the window with the feminine exclamation, "Good gracious me!"

Lingering for an instant, only to assure himself that the fair speaker had secured her foothold and was in no danger of falling, Courtland snatched up his hat, which had providentially fallen inside the room, and retreated ingloriously to the other end of the parlor. The voice came again from the window, and struck him as being very sweet and clear:—

"Sophy, is that YOU?"

Courtland discreetly retired to the hall. To his great relief a voice from the outside answered, "Whar, Miss Sally?"

"What did yo' move the ladder for? Yo' might have killed me."

"Fo' God, Miss Sally, I didn't move no ladder!"

"Don't tell me, but go down and get my slipper. And bring up some more nails."

Courtland waited silently in the hall. In a few moments he heard a heavy footstep outside the rear window. This was his opportunity. Re-entering the parlor somewhat ostentatiously, he confronted a tall negro girl who was passing through the room carrying a tiny slipper in her hand. "Excuse me," he said politely, "but I could not find any one to announce me. Is Miss Dows at home?"

The girl instantly whipped the slipper behind her. "Is yo' wanting Miss Mirandy Dows," she asked with great dignity, "oah Miss Sally Dows—her niece? Miss Mirandy's bin gone to Atlanta for a week."

"I have a letter for Miss Miranda, but I shall be very glad if Miss Sally Dows will receive me," returned Courtland, handing the letter and his card to the girl.

She received it with a still greater access of dignity and marked deliberation. "It's clean gone outer my mind, sah, ef Miss Sally is in de resumption of visitahs at dis houah. In fac', sah," she continued, with intensified gravity and an exaggeration of thoughtfulness as the sounds of Miss Sally's hammering came shamelessly from the wall, "I doahn know exac'ly ef she's engaged playin' de harp, practicin' de languages, or paintin' in oil and watah colors, o' givin' audiences to offishals from de Court House. It might be de houah for de one or de odder. But I'll communicate wid her, sah, in de budwoh on de uppah flo'." She backed dexterously, so as to keep the slipper behind her, but with no diminution of dignity, out of a side door. In another moment the hammering ceased, followed by the sound of rapid whispering without; a few tiny twigs and leaves slowly rustled to the ground, and then there was complete silence. He ventured to walk to the fateful window again.

Presently he heard a faint rustle at the other end of the room, and he turned. A sudden tremulousness swept along his pulses, and then they seemed to pause; he drew a deep breath that was almost a sigh, and remained motionless.

He had no preconceived idea of falling in love with Miss Sally at first sight, nor had he dreamed such a thing possible. Even the girlish face that he had seen in the locket, although it had stirred him with a singular emotion, had not suggested that. And the ideal he had evolved from it was never a potent presence. But the exquisitely pretty face and figure before him, although it might have been painted from his own fancy of her, was still something more and something unexpected. All that had gone before had never prepared him for the beautiful girl who now stood there. It was a poor explanation to say that Miss Sally was four or five years older than her picture, and that later experiences, enlarged capacity, a different life, and new ambition had impressed her youthful face with a refined mobility; it was a weird fancy to imagine that the blood of those who had died for her had in some vague, mysterious way imparted an actual fascination to her, and he dismissed it. But even the most familiar spectator, like Sophy, could see that Miss Sally had the softest pink complexion, the silkiest hair, that looked as the floss of the Indian corn might look if curled, or golden spider threads if materialized, and eyes that were in bright gray harmony with both; that the frock of India muslin, albeit home-made, fitted her figure perfectly, from the azure bows on her shoulders to the ribbon around her waist; and that the hem of its billowy skirt showed a foot which had the reputation of being the smallest foot south of Mason and Dixon's Line! But it was something more intangible than this which kept Courtland breathless and silent.

"I'm not Miss Miranda Dows," said the vision with a frankness that was half childlike and half practical, as she extended a little hand, "but I can talk 'fahm' with yo' about as well as aunty, and I reckon from what Major Reed says heah," holding up the letter between her fingers, "as long as yo' get the persimmons yo' don't mind what kind o' pole yo' knock 'em down with."

The voice that carried this speech was so fresh, clear, and sweet that I am afraid Courtland thought little of its bluntness or its conventional transgressions. But it brought him his own tongue

quite unemotionally and quietly. “I don’t know what was in that note, Miss Dows, but I can hardly believe that Major Reed ever put my present felicity quite in that way.”

Miss Sally laughed. Then with a charming exaggeration she waved her little hand towards the sofa.

“There! Yo’ naturally wanted a little room for that, co’nnle, but now that yo’ ‘ve got it off,—and mighty pooty it was, too,—yo’ can sit down.” And with that she sank down at one end of the sofa, prettily drew aside a white billow of skirt so as to leave ample room for Courtland at the other, and clasping her fingers over her knees, looked demurely expectant.

“But let me hope that I am not disturbing you unseasonably,” said Courtland, catching sight of the fateful little slipper beneath her skirt, and remembering the window. “I was so preoccupied in thinking of your aunt as the business manager of these estates that I quite forget that she might have a lady’s hours for receiving.”

“We haven’t got any company hours,” said Miss Sally, “and we haven’t just now any servants for company manners, for we’re short-handed in the fields and barns. When yo’ came I was nailing up the laths for the vines outside, because we couldn’t spare carpenters from the factory. But,” she added, with a faint accession of mischief in her voice, “yo’ came to talk about the fahm?”

“Yes,” said Courtland, rising, “but not to interrupt the work on it. Will you let me help you nail up the laths on the wall? I have some experience that way, and we can talk as we work. Do oblige me!”

The young girl looked at him brightly.

“Well, now, there’s nothing mean about THAT. Yo’ mean it for sure?”

“Perfectly. I shall feel so much less as if I was enjoying your company under false pretenses.”

“Yo’ just wait here, then.”

She jumped from the sofa, ran out of the room, and returned presently, tying the string of a long striped cotton blouse—evidently an extra one of Sophy’s—behind her back as she returned. It was gathered under her oval chin by a tape also tied behind her, while her fair hair was tucked under the usual red bandana handkerchief of the negro housemaid. It is scarcely necessary to add that the effect was bewitching.

“But,” said Miss Sally, eying her guest’s smartly fitting frock-coat, “yo’ ‘ll spoil yo’r pooty clothes, sure! Take off yo’r coat—don’t mind me—and work in yo’r shirtsleeves.”

Courtland obediently flung aside his coat and followed his active hostess through the French window to the platform outside. Above them a wooden ledge or cornice, projecting several inches, ran the whole length of the building. It was on this that Miss Sally had evidently found a foothold while she was nailing up a trellis-work of laths between it and the windows of the second floor. Courtland found the ladder, mounted to the ledge, followed by the young girl, who smilingly waived his proffered hand to help her up, and the two gravely set to work. But in the intervals of hammering and tying up the vines Miss Sally’s tongue was not idle. Her talk was as fresh, as quaint, as original as herself, and yet so practical and to the purpose of Courtland’s visit as to excuse his delight in it and her own fascinating propinquity. Whether she stopped to take a nail from between her pretty lips when she spoke to him, or whether holding on perilously with one hand to the trellis while she gesticulated with the hammer, pointing out the divisions of the plantation from her coign of vantage, he thought she was as clear and convincing to his intellect as she was distracting to his senses.

She told him how the war had broken up their old home in Pineville, sending her father to serve in the Confederate councils of Richmond, and leaving her aunt and herself to manage the property alone; how the estate had been devastated, the house destroyed, and how they had barely time to remove a few valuables; how, although SHE had always been opposed to secession and the war, she had not gone North, preferring to stay with her people, and take with them the punishment of the folly she had foreseen. How after the war and her father’s death she and her aunt had determined to “reconstruct THEMSELVES” after their own fashion on this bit of property, which had survived their fortunes because it had always been considered valueless and unprofitable for negro labor. How

at first they had undergone serious difficulty, through the incompetence and ignorance of the freed laborer, and the equal apathy and prejudice of their neighbors. How they had gradually succeeded with the adoption of new methods and ideas that she herself had conceived, which she now briefly and clearly stated. Courtland listened with a new, breathless, and almost superstitious interest: they were HIS OWN THEORIES—perfected and demonstrated!

"But you must have had capital for this?"

Ah, yes! that was where they were fortunate. There were some French cousins with whom she had once stayed in Paris, who advanced enough to stock the estate. There were some English friends of her father's, old blockade runners, who had taken shares, provided them with more capital, and imported some skilled laborers and a kind of steward or agent to represent them. But they were getting on, and perhaps it was better for their reputation with their neighbors that they had not been BEHOLDEN to the "No'th." Seeing a cloud pass over Courtland's face, the young lady added with an affected sigh, and the first touch of feminine coquetry which had invaded their wholesome camaraderie:—

"Yo' ought to have found us out BEFORE, co'nnle."

For an impulsive moment Courtland felt like telling her then and there the story of his romantic quest; but the reflection that they were standing on a narrow ledge with no room for the emotions, and that Miss Sally had just put a nail in her mouth and a start might be dangerous, checked him. To this may be added a new jealousy of her previous experiences, which he had not felt before. Nevertheless, he managed to say with some effusion:—

"But I hope we are not too late NOW. I think my principals are quite ready and able to buy up any English or French investor now or to come."

"Yo' might try yo' hand on that one," said Miss Sally, pointing to a young fellow who had just emerged from the office and was crossing the courtyard. "He's the English agent."

He was square-shouldered and round-headed, fresh and clean looking in his white flannels, but with an air of being utterly distinct and alien to everything around him, and mentally and morally irreconcilable to it. As he passed the house he glanced shyly at it; his eye brightened and his manner became self-conscious as he caught sight of the young girl, but changed again when he saw her companion. Courtland likewise was conscious of a certain uneasiness; it was one thing to be helping Miss Sally ALONE, but certainly another thing to be doing so under the eye of a stranger; and I am afraid that he met the stony observation of the Englishman with an equally cold stare. Miss Sally alone retained her languid ease and self-possession. She called out, "Wait a moment, Mr. Champney," slipped lightly down the ladder, and leaning against it with one foot on its lowest rung awaited his approach.

"I reckoned yo' might be passing by," she said, as he came forward. "Co'nnle Courtland," with an explanatory wave of the hammer towards her companion, who remained erect and slightly stiffened on the cornice, "is no relation to those figures along the frieze of the Redlands Court House, but a No'th'n officer, a friend of Major Reed's, who's come down here to look after So'th'n property for some No'th'n capitalists. Mr. Champney," she continued, turning and lifting her eyes to Courtland as she indicated Champney with her hammer, "when he isn't talking English, seeing English, thinking English, dressing English, and wondering why God didn't make everything English, is trying to do the same for HIS folks. Mr. Champney, Co'nnle Courtland. Co'nnle Courtland, Mr. Champney!" The two men bowed formally. "And now, Co'nnle, if yo'll come down, Mr. Champney will show yo' round the fahm. When yo' 've got through yo'll find me here at work."

Courtland would have preferred, and half looked for her company and commentary on this round of inspection, but he concealed his disappointment and descended. It did not exactly please him that Champney seemed relieved, and appeared to accept him as a bona fide stranger who could not possibly interfere with any confidential relations that he might have with Miss Sally. Nevertheless, he met the Englishman's offer to accompany him with polite gratitude, and they left the house together.

In less than an hour they returned. It had not even taken that time for Courtland to discover that the real improvements and the new methods had originated with Miss Sally; that she was virtually the controlling influence there, and that she was probably retarded rather than assisted by the old-fashioned and traditional conservatism of the company of which Champney was steward. It was equally plain, however, that the young fellow was dimly conscious of this, and was frankly communicative about it.

"You see, over there they work things in a different way, and, by Jove! they can't understand that there is any other, don't you know? They're always wigging me as if I could help it, although I've tried to explain the nigger business, and all that, don't you know? They want Miss Dows to refer her plans to me, and expect me to report on them, and then they'll submit them to the Board and wait for its decision. Fancy Miss Dows doing that! But, by Jove! they can't conceive of her AT ALL over there, don't you know?"

"Which Miss Dows do you mean?" asked Courtland dryly.

"Miss Sally, of course," said the young fellow briskly. "SHE manages everything—her aunt included. She can make those niggers work when no one else can, a word or smile from her is enough. She can make terms with dealers and contractors—her own terms, too—when they won't look at MY figures. By Jove! she even gets points out of those traveling agents and inventors, don't you know, who come along the road with patents and samples. She got one of those lightning-rod and wire-fence men to show her how to put up an arbor for her trailing roses. Why, when I first saw YOU up on the cornice, I thought you were some other chap that she'd asked—don't you know—that is, at first, of course!—you know what I mean—ha, by Jove!—before we were introduced, don't you know."

"I think I OFFERED to help Miss Dows," said Courtland with a quickness that he at once regretted.

"So did HE, don't you know? Miss Sally does not ASK anybody. Don't you see? a fellow don't like to stand by and see a young lady like her doing such work." Vaguely aware of some infelicity in his speech, he awkwardly turned the subject: "I don't think I shall stay here long, myself."

"You expect to return to England?" asked Courtland.

"Oh, no! But I shall go out of the company's service and try my own hand. There's a good bit of land about three miles from here that's in the market, and I think I could make something out of it. A fellow ought to settle down and be his own master," he answered tentatively, "eh?"

"But how will Miss Dows be able to spare you?" asked Courtland, uneasily conscious that he was assuming an indifference.

"Oh, I'm not much use to her, don't you know—at least not HERE. But I might, if I had my own land and if we were neighbors. I told you SHE runs the place, no matter who's here, or whose money is invested."

"I presume you are speaking now of young Miss Dows?" said Courtland dryly.

"Miss Sally—of course—always," said Champney simply. "She runs the shop."

"Were there not some French investors—relations of Miss Dows? Does anybody represent THEM?" asked Courtland pointedly.

Yet he was not quite prepared for the naive change in his companion's face. "No. There was a sort of French cousin who used to be a good deal to the fore, don't you know? But I rather fancy he didn't come here to look after the PROPERTY," returned Champney with a quick laugh. "I think the aunt must have written to his friends, for they 'called him off,' and I don't think Miss Sally broke her heart about him. She's not that sort of girl—eh? She could have her pick of the State if she went in for that sort of thing—eh?"

Although this was exactly what Courtland was thinking, it pleased him to answer in a distrait sort of fashion, "Certainly, I should think so," and to relapse into an apparently business abstraction.

"I think I won't go in," continued Champney as they neared the house again. "I suppose you'll have something more to say to Miss Dows. If there's anything else you want of ME, come to the

office. But SHE'LL know. And—er—er—if you're—er—staying long in this part of the country, ride over and look me up, don't you know? and have a smoke and a julep; I have a boy who knows how to mix them, and I've some old brandy sent me from the other side. Good-by."

More awkward in his kindliness than in his simple business confidences, but apparently equally honest in both, he shook Courtland's hand and walked away. Courtland turned towards the house. He had seen the farm and its improvements; he had found some of his own ideas practically discounted; clearly there was nothing left for him to do but to thank his hostess and take his leave. But he felt far more uneasy than when he had arrived; and there was a singular sense of incompleteness in his visit that he could not entirely account for. His conversation with Champney had complicated—he knew not why—his previous theories of Miss Dows, and although he was half conscious that this had nothing to do with the business that brought him there, he tried to think that it had. If Miss Sally was really—a—a—distracting element to contiguous man, it was certainly something to be considered in a matter of business of which she would take a managerial part. It was true that Champney had said she was "not that sort of girl," but this was the testimony of one who was clearly under her influence. He entered the house through the open French window. The parlor was deserted. He walked through the front hall and porch; no one was there. He lingered a few moments, a slight chagrin beginning to mingle with his uneasiness. She might have been on the lookout for him. She or Sophy must have seen him returning. He would ring for Sophy, and leave his thanks and regrets for her mistress. He looked for a bell, touched it, but on being confronted with Sophy, changed his mind and asked to SEE Miss Dows. In the interval between her departure and the appearance of Miss Sally he resolved to do the very thing which he had dismissed from his thoughts but an hour before as ill-timed and doubtful. He had the photograph and letter in his pocket; he would make them his excuse for personally taking leave of her.

She entered with her fair eyebrows lifted in a pretty surprise.

"I declare to goodness, I thought yo' 'd ridden over to the red barn and gone home from there. I got through my work on the vines earlier than I thought. One of Judge Garret's nephews dropped in in time to help me with the last row. Yo' needn't have troubled yo'self to send up for me for mere company manners, but Sophy says yo' looked sort of 'anxious and particular' when yo' asked for me —so I suppose yo' want to see me for something."

Mentally objurgating Sophy, and with an unpleasant impression in his mind of the unknown neighbor who had been helping Miss Sally in his place, he nevertheless tried to collect himself gallantly.

"I don't know what my expression conveyed to Sophy," he said with a smile, "but I trust that what I have to tell you may be interesting enough to make you forget my second intrusion." He paused, and still smiling continued: "For more than three years, Miss Dows, you have more or less occupied my thoughts; and although we have actually met to-day only for the first time, I have during that time carried your image with me constantly. Even this meeting, which was only the result of an accident, I had been seeking for three years. I find you here under your own peaceful vine and fig-tree, and yet three years ago you came to me out of the thunder-cloud of battle."

"My good gracious!" said Miss Sally.

She had been clasping her knee with her linked fingers, but separated them and leaned backward on the sofa with affected consternation, but an expression of growing amusement in her bright eyes. Courtland saw the mistake of his tone, but it was too late to change it now. He handed her the locket and the letter, and briefly, and perhaps a little more seriously, recounted the incident that had put him in possession of them. But he entirely suppressed the more dramatic and ghastly details, and his own superstition and strange prepossession towards her.

Miss Sally took the articles without a tremor, or the least deepening or paling of the delicate, faint suffusion of her cheek. When she had glanced over the letter, which appeared to be brief, she said, with smiling, half-pitying tranquillity:—

“Yes!—it WAS that poor Chet Brooks, sure! I heard that he was killed at Snake River. It was just like him to rush in and get killed the first pop! And all for nothing, too,—pure foolishness!”

Shocked, yet relieved, but uneasy under both sensations, Courtland went on blindly:

“But he was not the only one, Miss Dows. There was another man picked up who also had your picture.”

“Yes—Joyce Masterton. They sent it to me. But you didn’t kill HIM, too?”

“I don’t know that I personally killed either,” he said a little coldly. He paused, and continued with a gravity which he could not help feeling very inconsistent and even ludicrous: “They were brave men, Miss Dows.”

“To have worn my picture?” said Miss Sally brightly.

“To have THOUGHT they had so much to live for, and yet to have willingly laid down their lives for what they believed was right.”

“Yo’ didn’t go huntin’ me for three years to tell ME, a So’th’n girl, that So’th’n men know how to fight, did yo’, co’nnle?” returned the young lady, with the slightest lifting of her head and drooping of her blue-veined lids in a divine hauteur. “They were always ready enough for that, even among themselves. It was much easier for these pooah boys to fight a thing out than think it out, or work it out. Yo’ folks in the No’th learned to do all three; that’s where you got the grip on us. Yo’ look surprised, co’nnle.”

“I didn’t expect you would look at it—quite in—in—that way,” said Courtland awkwardly.

“I am sorry I disappointed yo’ after yo’ ‘d taken such a heap o’ trouble,” returned the young lady with a puzzling assumption of humility as she rose and smoothed out her skirts, “but I couldn’t know exactly what yo’ might be expecting after three years; if I HAD, I might have put on mo’ning.” She stopped and adjusted a straying tendril of her hair with the sharp corner of the dead man’s letter. “But I thank yo’, all the same, co’nnle. It was real good in yo’ to think of toting these things over here.” And she held out her hand frankly.

Courtland took it with the sickening consciousness that for the last five minutes he had been an unconscionable ass. He could not prolong the interview after she had so significantly risen. If he had only taken his leave and kept the letter and locket for a later visit, perhaps when they were older friends! It was too late now. He bent over her hand for a moment, again thanked her for her courtesy, and withdrew. A moment later she heard the receding beat of his horse’s hoofs on the road.

She opened the drawer of a brass-handled cabinet, and after a moment’s critical survey of her picture in the dead man’s locket, tossed it and the letter into the recesses of the drawer. Then she stopped, removed her little slipper from her foot, looked at THAT, too, thoughtfully, and called “Sophy!”

“Miss Sally?” said the girl, reappearing at the door.

“Are you sure you did not move that ladder?”

“I ‘clare to goodness, Miss Sally, I never teched it!”

Miss Sally directed a critical glance at her handmaiden’s red-coifed head. “No,” she said to herself softly, “it felt nicer than wool, anyway!”

CHAPTER III

In spite of the awkward termination of his visit,—or perhaps BECAUSE of it,—Courtland called again at the plantation within the week. But this time he was accompanied by Drummond, and was received by Miss Miranda Dows, a tall, aquiline-nosed spinster of fifty, whose old-time politeness had become slightly affected, and whose old beliefs had given way to a half-cynical acceptance of new facts. Mr. Drummond, delighted with the farm and its management, was no less fascinated by Miss Sally, while Courtland was now discreet enough to divide his attentions between her and her aunt, with the result that he was far from participating in Champney's conviction of Miss Miranda's unimportance. To the freedmen she still represented the old implacable task-mistress, and it was evident that they superstitiously believed that she still retained a vague power of overriding the Fourteenth Amendment at her pleasure, and was only to be restrained by the mediation of the good-humored and sensible Miss Sally. Courtland was quick to see the value of this influence in the transition state of the freedmen, and pointed it out to his principal. Drummond's previous doubts and skepticism, already weakened by Miss Sally's fascinations, vanished entirely at this prospect of beneficially utilizing these lingering evils of slavery. He was convinced, he was even enthusiastic. The foreign investors were men to be bought out; the estate improved and enlarged by the company, and the fair owners retained in the management and control. Like most prejudiced men, Drummond's conversion was sudden and extreme, and, being a practical man, was at once acted upon. At a second and third interview the preliminaries were arranged, and in three weeks from Courtland's first visit, the Dows' plantation and part of Major Reed's were merged in the "Drummond Syndicate," and placed beyond financial uncertainty. Courtland remained to represent the company as superintendent at Redlands, and with the transfer of the English investments Champney retired, as he had suggested, to a smaller venture of his own, on a plantation a few miles distant which the company had been unable to secure.

During this interval Courtland had frequent interviews with Miss Sally, and easy and unrestrained access to her presence. He had never again erred on the side of romance or emotion; he had never again referred to the infelix letter and photograph; and, without being obliged to confine himself strictly to business affairs, he had maintained an even, quiet, neighborly intercourse with her. Much of this was the result of his own self-control and soldierly training, and gave little indication of the deeper feeling that he was conscious lay beneath it. At times he caught the young girl's eyes fixed upon him with a mischievous curiosity. A strange thrill went through him; there are few situations so subtle and dangerous as the accidental confidences and understandings of two young people of opposite sex, even though the question of any sentimental inclination be still in abeyance. Courtland knew that Miss Sally remembered the too serious attitude he had taken towards her past. She might laugh at it, and even resent it, but she KNEW it, remembered it, knew that HE did, and this precious knowledge was confined to themselves. It was in their minds when there was a pause in their more practical and conventional conversation, and was even revealed in the excessive care which Miss Sally later took to avert at the right moment her mischievously smiling eyes. Once she went farther. Courtland had just finished explaining to her a plan for substituting small farm buildings for the usual half-cultivated garden-patches dear to the negro field-hand, and had laid down the drawings on the table in the office, when the young lady, leaning against it with her hands behind her, fixed her bright gray eyes on his serious face.

"I vow and protest, co'nnle," she said, dropping into one of the quaint survivals of an old-time phraseology peculiar to her people, "I never allowed yo' could just give yo'self up to business, soul and body, as yo' do, when I first met yo' that day."

"Why, what did you think me?" he asked quickly.

Miss Sally, who had a Southern aptitude for gesture, took one little hand from behind her, twirled it above her head with a pretty air of disposing of some airy nothing in a presumably masculine fashion, and said, “Oh, THAT.”

“I am afraid I did not impress you then as a very practical man,” he said, with a faint color.

“I thought you roosted rather high, co’nnle, to pick up many worms in the mo’ning. But,” she added with a dazzling smile, “I reckon from what yo’ said about the photograph, yo’ thought I wasn’t exactly what yo’ believed I ought to be, either.”

He would have liked to tell her then and there that he would have been content if those bright, beautiful eyes had never kindled with anything but love or womanly aspiration; that that soft, lazy, caressing voice had never been lifted beyond the fireside or domestic circle; that the sunny, tendriled hair and pink ears had never inclined to anything but whispered admiration; and that the graceful, lithe, erect figure, so independent and self-contained, had been satisfied to lean only upon his arm for support. He was conscious that this had been in his mind when he first saw her; he was equally conscious that she was more bewilderingly fascinating to him in her present inaccessible intelligence and practicality.

“I confess,” he said, looking into her eyes with a vague smile, “I did not expect you would be so forgetful of some one who had evidently cared for you.”

“Meaning Mr. Chet Brooks, or Mr. Joyce Masterton, or both. That’s like most yo’ men, co’nnle. Yo’ reckon because a girl pleases yo’ she ought to be grateful all her life—and yo’rs, too! Yo’ think different now! But yo’ needn’t act up to it quite so much.” She made a little deprecating gesture with her disengaged hand as if to ward off any retaliating gallantry. “I ain’t speaking for myself, co’nnle. Yo’ and me are good enough friends. But the girls round here think yo’ ‘re a trifle too much taken up with rice and niggers. And looking at it even in yo’r light, co’nnle, it ain’t BUSINESS. Yo’ want to keep straight with Major Reed, so it would be just as well to square the major’s woman folks. Tavy and Gussie Reed ain’t exactly poisonous, co’nnle, and yo’ might see one or the other home from church next Sunday. The Sunday after that, just to show yo’ ain’t particular, and that yo’ go in for being a regular beau, yo’ might walk home with ME. Don’t be frightened—I’ve got a better gown than this. It’s a new one, just come home from Louisville, and I’ll wear it for the occasion.”

He did not dare to say that the quaint frock she was then wearing—a plain “checked” household gingham used for children’s pinafores, with its ribbons of the same pattern, gathered in bows at the smart apron pockets—had become a part of her beauty, for he was already hopelessly conscious that she was lovely in anything, and he might be impelled to say so. He thanked her gravely and earnestly, but without gallantry or effusion, and had the satisfaction of seeing the mischief in her eyes increase in proportion to his seriousness, and heard her say with affected concern: “Bear up, co’nnle! Don’t let it worry yo’ till the time comes,” and took his leave.

On the following Sunday he was present at the Redlands Episcopal Church, and after the service stood with outward composure but some inward chafing among the gallant youth who, after the local fashion, had ranged themselves outside the doors of the building. He was somewhat surprised to find Mr. Champney, evidently as much out of place as himself, but less self-contained, waiting in the crowd of expectant cavaliers. Although convinced that the young Englishman had come only to see Miss Sally, he was glad to share his awkward isolation with another stranger, and greeted him pleasantly. The Dows’ pew, being nearer to the entrance than the Reeds’, gave up its occupants first. Colonel Courtland lifted his hat to Miss Miranda and her niece at the same moment that Champney moved forward and ranged himself beside them. Miss Sally, catching Courtland’s eye, showed the whites of her own in a backward glance of mischievous significance to indicate the following Reeds. When they approached, Courtland joined them, and finding himself beside Miss Octavia entered into conversation. Apparently the suppressed passion and sardonic melancholy of that dark-eyed young lady spurred him to a lighter, gayer humor even in proportion as Miss Sally’s good-natured levity and

sunny practicality always made him serious. They presently fell to the rear with other couples, and were soon quite alone.

A little haughty, but tall and erect in her well-preserved black grenadine dress, which gave her the appearance of a youthful but implacable widow, Miss Reed declared she had not seen the co'nnle for "a coon's age," and certainly had not expected to have the honor of his company as long as there were niggers to be elevated or painted to look like white men. She hoped that he and paw and Sally Dows were happy! They hadn't yet got so far as to put up a nigger preacher in the place of Mr. Symes, their rector, but she understood that there was some talk of running Hannibal Johnson—Miss Dows' coachman—for county judge next year! No! she had not heard that the co'nnle HIMSELF had thought of running for the office! He might laugh at her as much as he liked—he seemed to be in better spirits than when she first saw him—only she would like to know if it was "No'th'n style" to laugh coming home from church? Of course if it WAS she would have to adopt it with the Fourteenth Amendment. But, just now, she noticed the folks were staring at them, and Miss Sally Dows had turned round to look. Nevertheless, Miss Octavia's sallow cheek nearest the colonel—the sunny side—had taken a faint brunette's flush, and the corners of her proud mouth were slightly lifted.

"But, candidly, Miss Reed, don't you think that you would prefer to have old Hannibal, whom you know, as county judge, than a stranger and a Northern man like ME?"

Miss Reed's dark eyes glanced sideways at the handsome face and elegant figure beside her. Something like a saucy smile struggled to her thin lips.

"There mightn't be much to choose, Co'nnle."

"I admit it. We should both acknowledge our mistress, and be like wax in her hands."

"Yo' ought to make that pooty speech to Sally Dows, she's generally mistress around here. But," she added, suddenly fixing her eyes on him, "how does it happen that yo' ain't walking with her instead of that Englishman? Yo' know that it's as plain as day that he took that land over there just to be near her, when he was no longer agent."

But Courtland was always master of himself and quite at ease regarding Miss Sally when not in that lady's presence. "You forget," he said smilingly, "that I'm still a stranger and knew little of the local gossip; and if I did know it, I am afraid we didn't bargain to buy up with the LAND Mr. Champney's personal interest in the LANDLADY."

"Yo' 'd have had your hands full, for I reckon she's pooty heavily mortgaged in that fashion, already," returned Miss Reed with mere badinage than spitefulness in the suggestion. "And Mr. Champney was run pooty close by a French cousin of hers when he was here. Yo' haven't got any French books to lend me, co'nnle—have yo'? Paw says you read a heap of French, and I find it mighty hard to keep up MY practice since I left the Convent at St. Louis, for paw don't knew what sort of books to order, and I reckon he makes awful mistakes sometimes."

The conversation here turning upon polite literature, it appeared that Miss Octavia's French reading, through a shy, proud innocence and an imperfect knowledge of the wicked subtleties of the language, was somewhat broad and unconventional for a young lady. Courtland promised to send her some books, and even ventured to suggest some American and English novels not intensely "No'th'n" nor "metaphysical"—according to the accepted Southern beliefs. A new respect and pitying interest in this sullen, solitary girl, cramped by tradition, and bruised rather than enlightened by sad experiences, came over him. He found himself talking quite confidentially to the lifted head, arched eyebrows, and aquiline nose beside him, and even thinking what a handsome high-bred BROTHER she might have been to some one. When they had reached the house, in compliance with the familiar custom, he sat down on one of the lower steps of the veranda, while she, shaking out her skirt, took a seat a step or two above him. This enabled him, after the languid local fashion, to lean on his elbow and gaze up into the eyes of the young lady, while she with equal languor looked down upon him. But in the present instance Miss Reed leaned forward suddenly, and darting a sharp quick glance into his very consciousness said:—

"And yo' mean to say, co'nnle, there's nothing between yo' and Sally Dows?"

Courtland neither flushed, trembled, grew confused, nor prevaricated.

"We are good friends, I think," he replied quietly, without evasion or hesitation.

Miss Reed looked at him thoughtfully, "I reckon that is so—and no more. And that's why yo' 've been so lucky in everything," she said slowly.

"I don't think I quite understand," returned Courtland, smiling. "Is this a paradox—or a consolation?"

"It's the TRUTH," said Miss Reed gravely. "Those who try to be anything more to Sally Dows lose their luck."

"That is—are rejected by her. Is she really so relentless?" continued Courtland gayly.

"I mean that they lose their luck in everything. Something is sure to happen. And SHE can't help it either."

"Is this a Sibylline warning, Miss Reed?"

"No. It's nigger superstition. It came from Mammy Judy, Sally's old nurse. It's part of their regular Hoo-doo. She bewitched Miss Sally when she was a baby, so that everybody is bound to HER as long as they care for her, and she isn't bound to THEM in any way. All their luck goes to her as soon as the spell is on them," she added darkly.

"I think I know the rest," returned Courtland with still greater solemnity. "You gather the buds of the witch-hazel in April when the moon is full. You then pluck three hairs from the young lady's right eyebrow when she isn't looking"—

"Yo' can laugh, co'nnle, for yo' 're lucky—because yo' 're free."

"I'm not so sure of that," he said gallantly, "for I ought to be riding at this moment over to the Infirmary to visit my Sunday sick. If being made to pleasantly forget one's time and duty is a sign of witchcraft I am afraid Mammy Judy's enchantments were not confined to only one Southern young lady."

The sound of quick footsteps on the gravel path caused them both to look up. A surly looking young fellow, ostentatiously booted and spurred, and carrying a heavy rawhide riding-whip in his swinging hand, was approaching them. Deliberately, yet with uneasy self-consciousness, ignoring the presence of Courtland, he nodded abruptly to Miss Reed, ascended the steps, brushed past them both without pausing, and entered the house.

"Is that yo'r manners, Mr. Tom?" called the young lady after him, a slight flush rising to her sallow cheek. The young man muttered something from the hall which Courtland did not catch. "It's Cousin Tom Higbee," she explained half disdainfully. "He's had some ugliness with his horse, I reckon; but paw ought to teach him how to behave. And—I don't think he likes No'th'n men," she added gravely.

Courtland, who had kept his temper with his full understanding of the intruder's meaning, smiled as he took Miss Reed's hand in parting. "That's quite enough explanation, and I don't know why it shouldn't be even an apology."

Yet the incident left little impression on him as he strolled back to Redlands. It was not the first time he had tasted the dregs of former sectional hatred in incivility and discourtesy, but as it seldom came from his old personal antagonists—the soldiers—and was confined to the callow youth, previous non-combatants and politicians, he could afford to overlook it. He did not see Miss Sally during the following week.

CHAPTER IV

On the next Sunday he was early at church. But he had perhaps accented the occasion by driving there in a light buggy behind a fast thoroughbred, possibly selected more to the taste of a smart cavalry officer than an agricultural superintendent. He was already in a side pew, his eyes dreamily fixed on the prayer-book ledge before him, when there was a rustle at the church door, and a thrill of curiosity and admiration passed over the expectant congregation. It was the entrance of the Dows party, Miss Sally well to the fore. She was in her new clothes, the latest fashion in Louisville, the latest but two in Paris and New York.

It was over twenty years ago. I shall not imperil the effect of that lovely vision by recalling to the eye of to-day a fashion of yesterday. Enough, that it enabled her to set her sweet face and vapory golden hair in a horseshoe frame of delicate flowers, and to lift her oval chin out of a bewildering mist of tulle. Nor did a certain light polonaise conceal the outlines of her charming figure. Even those who were constrained to whisper to each other that "Miss Sally" must "be now going on twenty-five," did so because she still carried the slender graces of seventeen. The organ swelled as if to welcome her; as she took her seat a ray of sunlight, that would have been cruel and searching to any other complexion, drifted across the faint pink of her cheeks, and nestling in her nebulous hair became itself transfigured. A few stained-glass Virtues on the windows did not come out of this effulgence as triumphantly, and it was small wonder that the devotional eyes of the worshipers wandered from them to the face of Sally Dows.

When the service was over, as the congregation filed slowly into the aisle, Courtland slipped mutely behind her. As she reached the porch he said in an undertone:

"I brought my horse and buggy. I thought you might possibly allow me to drive"—But he was stopped by a distressful knitting of her golden brows. "No," she said quickly, but firmly, "you must not—it won't do." As Courtland hesitated in momentary perplexity, she smiled sweetly: "We'll walk round by the cemetery, if you like; it will take about as long as a drive." Courtland vanished, gave hurried instructions and a dollar to a lounging negro, and rejoined Miss Sally as the delighted and proud freedman drove out of the gate. Miss Sally heaved a slight sigh as the gallant equipage passed. "It was a mighty pooty turnout, co'nnle, and I'd have just admired to go, but it would have been rather hard on the other folks. There's the Reeds and Maxwells and Robertsons that are too pooah to keep blood horses, and too proud to ride behind anything else. It wouldn't be the right thing for us to go whirling by, scattering our dust over them." There was something so subtly pleasant in this implied partnership of responsibility, that Courtland forgot the abrupt refusal and thought only of the tact that prompted it. Nevertheless, here a spell seemed to fall upon his usually ready speech. Now that they were together for the first time in a distinctly social fashion, he found himself vacantly, meaninglessly silent, content to walk beside this charming, summery presence, brushed by its delicate draperies, and inhaling its freshness. Presently it spoke.

"It would take more than a thousand feet of lumber to patch up the cowsheds beyond the Moseley pasture, and an entirely new building with an improved dairy would require only about two thousand more. All the old material would come in good for fencing, and could be used with the new post and rails. Don't yo' think it would be better to have an out-and-out new building?"

"Yes, certainly," returned Courtland a little confusedly. He had not calculated upon this practical conversation, and was the more disconcerted as they were passing some of the other couples, who had purposely lingered to overhear them.

"And," continued the young girl brightly, "the freight question is getting to be a pretty serious one. Aunt Miranda holds some shares in the Briggsville branch line, and thinks something could be done with the directors for a new tariff of charges if she put a pressure on them; Tyler says that there was some talk of their reducing it one sixteenth per cent. before we move this year's crop."

Courtland glanced quickly at his companion’s face. It was grave, but there was the faintest wrinkling of the corner of the eyelid nearest him. “Had we not better leave these serious questions until to-morrow?” he said, smiling.

Miss Sally opened her eyes demurely. “Why, yo’ seemed SO quiet, I reckoned yo’ must be full of business this morning; but if yo’ prefer company talk, we’ll change the subject. They say that yo’ and Miss Reed didn’t have much trouble to find one last Sunday. She don’t usually talk much, but she keeps up a power of thinking. I should reckon,” she added, suddenly eying him critically, “that yo’ and she might have a heap o’ things to say to each other. She’s a good deal in yo’ fashion, co’nnle, she don’t forget, but”—more slowly—“I don’t know that THAT’S altogether the best thing for YO’!”

Courtland lifted his eyes with affected consternation. “If this is in the light of another mysterious warning, Miss Dows, I warn you that my intellect is already tottering with them. Last Sunday Miss Reed thrilled me for an hour with superstition and Cassandra-like prophecy. Don’t things ever happen accidentally here, and without warning?”

“I mean,” returned the young lady with her usual practical directness, “that Tave Reed remembers a good many horrid things about the wah that she ought to forget, but don’t. But,” she continued, looking at him curiously, “she allows she was mighty cut up by her cousin’s manner to yo’.”

“I am afraid that Miss Reed was more annoyed than I was,” said Courtland. “I should be very sorry if she attached any importance to it,” he added earnestly.

“And YO’ don’t?” continued Miss Sally.

“No. Why should I?” She noticed, however, that he had slightly drawn himself up a little more erect, and she smiled as he continued, “I dare say I should feel as he does if I were in his place.”

“But YO’ wouldn’t do anything underhanded,” she said quietly. As he glanced at her quickly she added dryly: “Don’t trust too much to people always acting in yo’ fashion, co’nnle. And don’t think too much nor too little of what yo’ hear here. Yo’ ‘re just the kind of man to make a good many silly enemies, and as many foolish friends. And I don’t know which will give yo’ the most trouble. Only don’t yo’ underrate EITHER, or hold yo’ head so high, yo’ don’t see what’s crawlin’ around yo’. That’s why, in a copperhead swamp, a horse is bitten oftener than a hog.”

She smiled, yet with knitted brows and such a pretty affectation of concern for her companion that he suddenly took heart.

“I wish I had ONE friend I could call my own,” he said boldly, looking straight into her eyes. “I’d care little for other friends, and fear no enemies.”

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