

"SUSAN is a strange woman," said MINNIE.

"And as good and beautiful as she is strange. I love her, in spite of myself, slave that she is! You, MINNIE, must think it a horrible institution that places such women in such positions."

"I never think, MAGGIE, when it's inconvenient," replied MINNIE, demurely.

"Well, it's mighty inconvenient, sometimes, and I congratulate you on your position," said GEORGE, who had joined the group just in time to hear the last sentence.

"Of course, slavery is the thing; I don't question that. Men wiser than I ever shall be have settled the matter, and it isn't for me to dig up foundations; but when I see SUSAN, and remember that she is a slave, as Miss TAYLOR says, I find it very inconvenient to think."

"Well," said MINNIE, "we had better finish the decorations, and liberate the slaves afterwards. I don't believe they would accept their freedom before the holidays."

"Always practical, Miss MINNIE. It's an excellent idea, that of finishing the decorations. Dinner will be ready in half an hour, and this room must be in order in exactly thirty minutes," so saying GEORGE snatched up wreaths and festoons, and clusters of scarlet berries, and went to work with a will, the girls and HARRY following his example.

The octoroon had finished her errand, and in so straight-forward and decided a manner as to admit of no questioning on the part of her young mistress. MARGARET's first impulse was to follow her and ascertain, if possible, what new trouble had come upon her; but it was so painfully evident that the miserable woman desired to avoid all notice, that MARGARET dismissed the idea of pursuit, and determined to seek her in her own room after dinner, where she knew she would be, while the rest of the family were enjoying their *sleestas*. The slave walked very quietly through the hall, down the length of the east verandah, and throwing her heavy shawl over her head, started off in the direction of HANNIBAL'S cabin. The impulse to fly—to put distance between herself and the house she had just left, was written all over the graceful, shrinking figure, gliding so noiselessly, and yet so determinedly, along the well beaten path. Mr. BRAYTON followed hastily. SUSAN never looked back. She knew who her pursuer was, and her heart almost stood still as she realized that steps were steadily gaining upon her.

"Oh, if I could but die," moaned the poor woman between her clenched teeth. "But death is never near to those who have nothing to live for."

Just then her name was gently pronounced, and a strong hand placed caressingly and firmly upon her arm. Even then the octoroon did not turn her head.

"Won't you speak to me, SUSAN?" continued the gentleman, in tones so low and tender that they might have been the accents of a lover, but for the immense difference in their social relations.

"Why do you seek me?" replied SUSAN, without lifting her eyes from the ground.

"I have not sought you, child," he answered. "It was your own plan to keep your residence a secret from me, and I submitted to it as a gentleman should. I supposed you were in Richmond; but as God lives, I have been as good as my word—have never inquired for you even."

"You gave me my liberty, did you not?" interrupted the octoroon, her beautiful eyes flashing fire.

"I did, SUSAN," and there was an exultant ring in the speaker's voice, as he pronounced the simple sentence that caused his companion for the first time to turn her eyes to his face.

"And yet your directions to Mr. HYATT were to dispose of me to the highest bidder as speedily as possible."

"It is a lie, SUSAN!" and the Southerner's nostrils dilated, and his countenance, for a moment, was livid with passion. "Who told you this falsehood?" he went on. "You must not walk another step until you have given me the full particulars."

"Mr. HYATT told me so the day before I was sold to Col. HEATHERSTONE, and—"

"What, SUSAN? Say those words again! Sold to Col. HEATHERSTONE!"

"Sold to Col. HEATHERSTONE," slowly repeated the wretched woman.

"Say the name!"

"No, dear master, not that," broke in his companion, quickly, her whole manner instantly changing. For a brief moment the sadness fled from her eyes, and instead of the quiver of grief round the lovely mouth, there appeared an indescribable joyousness—an expression of satisfaction—a flash of the intense love-nature of this strange woman.

"Where were your papers, SUSAN?" continued the gentleman, apparently unaware of this total change in his companion's manner.

"My papers were stolen from my trunk—also the money you gave me to go North with—if I pleased."

"And after that diabolical business, you could believe that I had instigated such a proceeding? SUSAN, child, I thought you knew me better!" And now there was no more rage in the man's voice, but only a plaintive undertone, a strange heart-wail that seemed to touch the very soul of the woman by his side.

"What could I think?" she replied, while all unconsciously her hand sought his arm. "Listen, please. Mr. HYATT sent for me to come to his office, and then placed in my hands a letter which he declared had just come from you—"

"—and the handwriting, SUSAN?"

"—could have sworn to its being yours."

"Yes, sir, of the most peremptory description."

"You will see in the future, child, if my life is spared to arrange matters; but I see that with such damning evidence of my mendacity, it is no use to say more at present. God bless you, SUSAN, and give you patience to wait a little. I will trouble you no longer."

"Dear master," and again lips and eyes were full of joy—and for an instant something deeper than joy as she gently detained him. "I believe you—and shall never doubt you again. It was only when driven almost to distraction by the horror of my position, that I ever harbored a thought of your injustice. Forgive me for that, please, and I will never do so again."

"Oh! you poor, hunted, tortured child! Forgive you? SUSAN, I should never have allowed you to leave me. You never could be as happy anywhere else as with me; and, truly home has never been home since you left it. And then, child, I have been so ill since."

A little convulsive shiver was all that testified to SUSAN'S having heard the last sentence.

"Twice have I almost crossed the dark river—and each time I felt that if I only had SUSAN with me—SUSAN to love me, and close my eyes—SUSAN to grieve for me a little after I was gone—Oh! how I suffered without you!"

"No more—for the love of the Saviour—no more, dear master! I should have come to you, had I known it. Believe that."

"Child, if you would only come back to me. Come back a free woman, as my house-keeper and companion—and—"

"No, master, no! It can never be—but listen a moment. If I can ever be of any service to you, should you be sick or in trouble, should you need anything that SUSAN can do for you, SUSAN will come—and may the powers above keep her fully informed of your situation. There comes Col. HEATHERSTONE, and we must separate."

Mr. BRAYTON hesitated for a parting word; but his companion was gone, out of sight almost before he realized that he was alone.

"Hallo! BRAYTON and SUSAN!" said the Colonel, softly, to himself, at the same time uttering a low, prolonged whistle. "Astounding how these pretty niggers do take hold of a fellow. It's a little rough to class SUSAN with the blacks, after all, for no one in the world would ever take her to be a nigger. Funny, though, that BRAYTON should leave all the pretty girls up to the house to run after a slave; but then, there's no accounting for tastes"—and the Colonel chuckled as if the little scene he had just witnessed was the funniest thing on record, and urged his horse forward, thinking it best not to have appeared to notice them. Mr. BRAYTON followed slowly and thoughtfully, and retiring to his room did not again mingle with the guests until the bell summoned them to dinner.

At the table SUSAN served in her accustomed place, quiet and reserved as ever; MARGARET'S eyes followed her anxiously, but no recognition was returned; the octoroon seemed made of stone, but late in the afternoon when MARGARET, having left her guests in their own rooms, sought SUSAN in hers, she found her sitting in a low chair before the fire, her whole body shaken with sobs. The mistress threw her arms around the slave.

"Dear SUSAN, darling SUSAN, tell your little MAGGIE what the matter is. Nobody loves you so well. Tell me all, SUSAN. I'm sure I can help you."

"I'm sure you would help me if you could, dear; but there's nothing to help. We all break down sometimes, child; I was feeling lonely, that's all. Has Mr. TRAVERSE gone away?"

"O never mind Mr. TRAVERSE. There is something the matter, and I could help you if you would let me. You may trust me, SUSAN, indeed you may."

MAGGIE was on her knees now, with her arms around SUSAN'S neck. Her voice and manner were inexpressibly sweet and coaxing, but though evidently touched, there was no confidential response. And MAGGIE, a little chilled, a little grieved, and more than ever mystified, was forced to stay outside the heart that she so desired to enter and brighten.

The news that the Convention of South Carolina had passed a secession ordinance was received at the HEATHERSTONE mansion in the very heart of the holiday season, and preparations for Christmas festivities and the merry intercourse of congenial friends were thereafter of secondary importance. The right of the States to secede, the consequences of secession, the effect upon the slaves, and a hundred other questions were discussed, and the first thought in every heart—the first question on every lip—was, "What news from the South?"

The Southern States were one immense volcano, and South Carolina was its fiery heart, but such was the agitation in this boiling center that it was felt to the remotest limits of the country, and in proud old Virginia, from the haughtiest master to the weakest slave, everybody was awed and thrilled by the hot-blooded act with which rebellion had been inaugurated. Event followed event in quick succession. Before the public mind had become accustomed to the thought that secession had actually been declared, the news spread through the country that the members of Congress from South Carolina had resigned their seats, and then that the seceding State had adopted resolutions in favor of a Confederate Government. This last decisive act took place on Christmas day, and the next afternoon HARRY TRAVERSE galloped over to Col. HEATHERSTONE'S with the Richmond papers that he had just received. The whole household and all were in the cheerful Mrs. HEATHERSTONE in her usual place

the sofa; MARGARET, MINNIE, HOPE and ALFRED chatting in a cozy corner; GEORGE teaching Point a new trick, and Col. HEATHERSTONE fast asleep in the glow of the open fire with his newspaper in his hand. Aunt CLARA and Mr. BRAYTON were holding a characteristic discussion on politics, and SUSAN had just entered in answer to her mistress's summons, to arrange the pillows for "my poor head."

"There's HARRY," cried GEORGE, the first to hear the beat of the horses' hoofs upon the gravelled walk. ALFRED and the girls rushed to the window, and HARRY gave his horse to a servant and ran up the steps to the piazza brandishing a package of newspapers. In a moment he was the center of an excited group, reading to his eager listeners the resolutions adopted by the South Carolina Convention, the details of the fierce excitement all over the State, and the editorials full of defiance, and certainty of success.

"Now let us hear from the North," said ALFRED, after the Southern papers were finished. The New York journals were next listened to with varying emotions by the little company whose individual interests extended so far and in so many different directions.

"There can be no longer any question as to the result," said Col. HEATHERSTONE. "Most of the extreme Southern States are all ready to follow the action of South Carolina. Before a month has passed there will be a strong confederation, desperate in their intention to defy the Government at Washington."

"And then," said MARGARET, rising in her excitement and walking up and down the room, "there will be a long cruel war, and fathers and husbands, and brothers will kill each other like wild beasts. O, was there no way to avoid this? Is there no way to avoid it now? Can there be no compromise?"

"Do sit down, MAGGIE, you make my head ache," said her mother, wearily. "Compromise! There will be compromise enough after a battle or two. A long war, indeed! Why, child, are you stupid enough to think that there will be much fighting?"

GEORGE sprang up eagerly, while Mrs. HEATHERSTONE was speaking, and crossed the room to the window. He was elate with excitement. MARGARET saw what was working in him with so much power, and sighed heavily. "He will go with the first troops," said she to herself. "But will he ever come back? This is indeed the beginning, but what will be the end?"

"There will undoubtedly be fighting," said Col. HEATHERSTONE, in reply to his wife, "but, let us hope, not much. The North has unwarrantably interfered with the South, and when she sees that we are in earnest, doubtless we shall come to an amicable understanding. In fact, I don't hold the North responsible at all," with a glance at his guests; "it is only the abolitionists who are to blame, and they are a very small minority." At the conclusion of this sentence HOPE walked out very gently.

"I hope I have said nothing to hurt Miss ARNOLD," continued Col. HEATHERSTONE.

"O, no," replied MINNIE, "you have said nothing; but the truth is that HOPE'S family are all abolitionists, dyed in the wool."

"Poor child, I am sorry for her; she has much to bear," said ALFRED.

"No more than most of us, I fear. I see separations and heart-breakings," and MARGARET followed HOPE to her room.

"Dear HOPE, let me in."

The door was opened softly.

"Excuse me, HOPE, darling, but I could not bear to leave you up here alone."

"Come in, MAGGIE. I want to talk with you. I must go home immediately. If there is fighting my brothers will be the first to go to the front, and I shall be needed. I ought not to be absent when my country is in trouble."

At that moment the thought came bitterly to the two loving friends that their country was no longer one. HOPE was already a foreigner in MAGGIE'S home.

"I suppose you must go, dear; I think I should want to if I were in your place. It is dreadful, this thought of brother killing brother; but we cannot help it, HOPE. Somebody has a fearful responsibility."

"Your brother thinks it is the abolitionists."

"But I don't, HOPE. I believe that slavery is wrong in its foundation, and what is wrong must some time fall to the ground. God is against slavery, and it may be that He used the abolitionists to bring about this crisis, but that matters little."

"Your negroes seem very happy."

"I think they are, and no doubt the majority of the slave owners treat their slaves well; and very likely if the negroes are freed they will be for years worse off in many respects than they are now; but I think as you do, HOPE, and as your father does about buying and selling human beings. I think I was born with the feeling. I don't know how else I got it."

The girls sat a long time, heart pressed to heart, talking over the past and exchanging sweet promises of remembrance for the future, little dreaming, as dark as the outbreak was to them, amid what scenes of blood their next meeting would be.

"What am de meaning of all dis talk about secess. Massa ALFRED?" inquired HANNIBAL, as he gravely went through his morning task of brushing the clothes of the young gentleman. For a moment ALFRED'S bright face was clouded; but only for a moment.

"You have heard a good deal of this, then, have you?" he replied, scanning the old negro's face attentively.

"Wal, yes, massa, a considerable much. There's no way of not hearing it, less we tops up our ears, and there don't seem to be much time to give to dat performance on de plantation, at any rate. HANNIBAL only

ask for information. De skin be contagious brack, Massa ALFRED. Golly! dare's no stake about dat; but dis lump of ebony jus' about come to de 'clusion dat dare's jus' as much—wat you call 'em—inquisitumness—stowed away under a brack hide as a white one."

"Yes, HANNIBAL," laughed his companion, "that has been my experience; but what do you want to know?"

"Wall, massa, dis be 'bout it. Wat am old Caroliny 'specting to do wid all dis howling 'bout getting out? Making out, in de fust place, dat she could get out, where de debbl be she going when she am out? 'Scuse de word, Massa ALFRED, but somehow it do seem to HANNIBAL, 'sif de old feller hab jus' jumped into mos' ebery body."

"Sound again, HANNIBAL!" and the young man stopped a moment and reflected what he had best say to the intelligent old negro. Way down in his heart ALFRED HEATHERSTONE despised the institution of his fathers. A Southerner by birth, an aristocrat by education, he was nevertheless in spirit the most democratic of men. To him slaves were not only slaves, but brothers.

Like many another true hearted Virginian, he felt that there was nothing in the system to recommend it save the old argument, which had then never been successfully combated, that the work of the South could never be carried on save by negroes and bondmen. "Liberate the slaves, and your beautiful country is but a wretched wilderness," said CALHOUN, in one of his long-to-be-remembered speeches, and this sentiment was not only indorsed, but firmly and honestly believed in by the great mass of slave holders. It was freedom and poverty—slavery and opulence. What wonder that they held on so staunchly and pluckily to the last?

"Bress de LORD, massa ALFRED!" interrupted HANNIBAL, as he hung up his broom and proceeded to leave the room, "HANNIBAL hab no wish to be too inquisitum. He only tink it would be a good ting to know what be golog on, so's to tell dem udder niggers de truff. Dey won't git much ob de truff, you can jus' bet high on dat, Massa ALFRED!"

"I realize that fact, HANNIBAL," replied ALFRED, slowly; "I suppose they have already been told the most ridiculous stories about the progress of affairs."

"Dat am de case," answered HANNIBAL, with quite as much deliberation.

"The Northern States, HANNIBAL, have no right to quarrel with our institutions—no right to dictate terms to us. They are insolent in their demands. The chief officers of these United States have been mostly composed of Southern men—who understood their business—knew what was for the best good of the whole country. What do you think GEORGE WASHINGTON would say if he could see the dreadful confusion we are thrown into by a few hot-headed, ignorant radicals?"

"Mebbe he do see, massa ALFRED," replied the negro, lifting his eyes with great reverence. "But of course it would be berry wicked for dis old colored pusson to say wat Massa WASHINGTON say—but praps he take into 'sideration dat de present time am a good bit furdur ahead time dan wen he walk on de earth, Saint dat he was. One ting HANNIBAL hab notice ever since he so high, Massa ALFRED, dat de 'pinious ob men no more stan still dan do de men demselves. Ebery ting go ahead; some tings seem to jump ahead—and dat de case at dis time. Seems to Hannibal 'sif de berry hebens demselves hab grown big in de las' few years. Dem stars, too, dey wink at HANNIBAL in a way dey neber winked afore—bress de LORD. De only question dat discomberated dis skull was—wat dat up and a doing old Caroliny 'spectod to do wid she self after she hab walk away from de res' ob dem States. Do she 'spee to take a trip to de udder side of de big mill pond—as Massa GEORGE call it—and den march back into her place when de rowdidow hab all blown ober?"

"Time will tell, HANNIBAL," said ALFRED, kindly dismissing his servant; "and it is best to speculate as little as possible about it. Growth," he repeated, as the door closed upon the venerable figure, "Growth! This isn't the first lesson I have taken from you, dear old HANNIBAL. Why the possibilities of that nature are beyond all estimate! A christian philosopher by birth—a slave by education! Great Heavens! Is this right? Oh! that WASHINGTON or some other noble spirit would speak to this bewildered country! It is no use to take counsel with each other—for even among us Southerners there is very little unanimity of opinion. I see nothing before us but war—war of the bloodiest and most relentless kind."

Mr. BRAYTON appeared singularly disconcerted—strangely cast down by the news constantly arriving from different parts of the country. Very much to MARGARET'S annoyance, he seemed to avoid the drawing-room whenever there was anything particularly jolly going on. Sometimes, in order not to appear eccentric or gloomy, he would join the group for a few moments, and steal quietly away at the very first opportunity. He had attempted, on several different occasions, to have a private interview with Col. HEATHERSTONE on the subject of SUSAN, but the house was so full of company, and the moments so crammed with festivities and startling intelligence, that the suitable opportunity did not offer. Not only did the innate delicacy of the man rebel at the idea of requesting an interview with his host; but something deeper than that even—knowledge that his motives would be entirely misunderstood. If they could meet naturally, drift into conversation naturally, then the whole trouble would be obviated, but up to this time, no such occasion had offered.—[To be continued.]