SOUTHERN DARKIES;

—OR,—

FUN ON THE PLANTATION.

THE old man sat looking into the fire, his elbows resting on the arms of his chair, while he gently tapped together the trips of his fingers. "We Yankees," said he thoughtfully, and with a pause at almost every sentence—"we Yankees have but a meagre conception of the negro character, the real plantation negro—a fact I did not admit forty years ago. Otway—or, as everybody called him, Ot—Rainsford and I were room-mate at Harvard. He was a fine fellow to look at, and a very fine fellow to be with—full of life, overflowing with fun, wild; not so much because he was a full-blooded Southerner, as because he was an orphan with his fortune in his own hands. Most young men, North or South, will be wild who have a plenty of money, which, not having earned, they do not know how to value. One night, with a yawn, he threw down his book and stretched himself on the bee. I stood with my back to the fire, looking at him. Presently I said, "So you are going home for the holidays, Ot?"

"'Yes—Christmas on the plantation.'

"'They say your negroes are to have their freedom at your death. Is dot sho? as the Dutchman says."

"Dot is sho," replied Ot with another yawn.

"'I wonder you are not afraid to go among them,' said I.

"He laughed with genuine amusement, and I asked if any other white person would be on the plantation.

"'The overseer,' said Ot. 'But suppose you go with me, old fellow?"

"'But suppose the negroes make away with me too?"

"'Well, you will be no great loss, that I can see,' replied my companion, and, adopting his view of the subject, I went with him home.

"Arrived at the plantation, we had the house all to ourselves, for his next of kin was a married sister who lived in the adjoining State, but we had as many chambermaids and dining-room servants and servants of every other age, sex and calling, as though Ot had been a patriarch.

"'The third morning after our arrival we were loitering over the breakfast-table, each of us with a newspaper in his hand. Plantation negroes were more of a curiosity to me than to Ot, so he was giving his entire attention to his paper, while mine was divided. First appeared 'Aunt Fanny,' the ideal Southern cook, shining black, ponderous, jolly except when on duty; every hair confined by a gorgeous turban; her broad hips encircled by a huge cotton apron. The bill of fare was always made out by herself—and a most excellent bill it was—but she came every day to inquire if her young master desired any change in the *menu*.

This morning, however, I observed her entrance with surprise, because we were not more than half through breakfast, and she stood silently out of range of Ot's eye. Next appeared one of the housemaids, who asked in a loud, apologetic whisper if anybody had 'seed her broom." No one appeared to have seen it, and she took up her station near the cook. Petrarch, head-writer, stood with his eye on the door, and none of his subordinates budged from their places, though the supply of buckwheat cakes was exhausted.

"'Go git some cakes,' whispered Cicero.

"'You go yo'se'f,' returned Jim.

"Ot was still reading, and observed neither the omission not the whispering.

"Soon appeared another housemaid to look for her broom. Misery loves company; so, not finding what she sought, Housemaid No. 2 planted herself by the side of No. 1. Then appeared the coachman, who always came to receive orders for the day. He seemed content to await his master's leisure, and stood in dignified silence, waiving, however, the prominence due to his position, for he stationed himself in the rear of the cook. Next came one of the hostlers, I suppose in search of the coachman. A few moments after appeared another woman-servant—Housemaid No. 3 apparently, for she made various feints toward the sideboard, peeping under it, dashing round it and muttering unintelligibly something about her 'duster.'

"This attracted Ot's attention, and he glanced over his shoulder at the group assembled behind him. Then he turned in his chair, placed his open hands on his knees, his elbows sticking out at right angles, and stared solemnly at the crowd. The crowd began to giggle and seemed abashed, for the cook trod on the coachman's toes and the housemaids snickered behind their aprons. The hostler hid behind his next-door neighbor, and, spite of his toes, the coachman sought the rear. Thus, in a giggling, disorderly mass, they huddled together near the door, each trying to hide behind the other.

"Ot turned to Petrarch, the only one who retained his place by right. 'What the d——l does this mean?" he asked.

"But before Petrarch could reply there appeared in the doorway a great stalwart negro, and behind him two or three others who appeared to be urging him forward with nudges and whispers and encouraging digs in the ribs. The fellow twisted a peaked old tan-colored felt hat between his fingers, and appeared half dead with embarrassment. He wore the most comical expression of bashfulness you ever saw in your life. It would not have been so funny if he had not been such a great strapping dog; but as he lagged at the door, and twisted his shoulder, and hung his head, and almost tore his old hat in pieces, the other negros laughed outright, and I must confess I joined them. (I soon understood that the fellow belonged to a neighboring plantation, and was here to ask Ot's permission to come courting on his premises.)

"Ot looked solemn as an owl: 'Well, Jack?"

"'Sarvant, Mars Ot.'

"Ot looked at Jack, and Jack looked at Ot, and the negroes looked at them both, and nudged each other and giggled. Finally, Jack looked down at the floor, fairly wringing his old hat with embarrassment, and broke into a laugh which betrayed an expanse of scarlet gums and white teeth truly appalling.

"'What's your will if you had it, Jack?' asked Ot.

"'Oh, that's what you're after, is it?' asked Ot; and turning to the cook, added, 'Step out, Aunt Fanny: Jack wants you.'

"There was a shout of laughter, and Aunt Fanny's fat sides shook as she answered contemptuously, 'Lor,' Mars Ot! I done spank dat nigger too offen for stealin' biskit outen de ubben an' foolin' roun' my kittles an' pans! 'Tain't me he's arter.'

"'Who is it, Jack?"

"Well, Mars Ot," said Jack, who, having made the plunge and survived the shock, spoke with renewed confidence in himself—'well, Mars, Ot, ef I had my ruthers, I ruther have Lucindy.'

"'Let Lucinda appear,' said Ot, solemnly.

"Whereupon a posse of curious housemaids, with feigned vivacity and tittering haste, went to fetch Lucinda.

"'Lucinda,' said Ot, as the dusky maid appeared with drooping head and sidelong glance, half willing, half afraid—'Lucinda, Jack wants to marry Aunt Fanny.'

"'Lor,' now, Mars Ot! Lucindy, she know better'n dat,' remonstrated Jack with a reassuring glance toward his fair.

"'Me, sir?' said Lucinda scornfully to Ot. '*Me*, sir?' No, sir. *I* ain't no manneruverjeckshunsir,' running her words together and ostentatiously turning her back on Jack; ''specially ef Aunt Fanny, *she* ai n't.'

"'I didn't mean Aunt Fanny: Jack says it is you he wants.'

"'Oh, pshor now, Mars Ot!' and Lucinda seemed attempting to escape from the detaining hands of her sister-housemaids, but, abashed perhaps by Jack's tender glances, she ran in every direction except toward the open door.

"'You see, Jack, you had better go home,' said Ot, resuming his paper (Lucinda did not run so fast), 'or, better still, suppose you take one of the others?' (They all let go Lucinna, and she might have run as fast as she pleased.)

"Jack confusedly turned his hat inside out, and virtually rejected this offer, so Ot continued: 'Take yourself off now, Jack and you are not to come on my plantation. Don't show your face here again; do you understand?'

"The crowd looked on in dismay, for it had been understood that Jack and Lucinda were to be married during the Christmas holidays.

"Ot continued: 'I won't have you bothering the women-folk and spoiling their Christmas; so take yourself off, and don't come back again. Does that suit you, Lucinda?'

"Lucinda bit the corner of her apron, and dolefully made answer, 'Jes,' as you say, Mars Ot.'

"'Oh no: it shall be just as you say. I've no objection to Jack myself.'

"'An' I'm sure I've no manneruverjeckshun to his comin' on de plantashun, Mars Ot. He ain't sp'ilin' of nothin', as I knows on it;' and Lucinda quite bit off the corner of her apron.

"'Dar now, Mars Ot,' said Aunt Fanny with a motherly laugh, 'eb'body know what she meant by dat.'

"'I don't: what does she mean?

"'Hy, Mars Ot, she mean—

De grapevine walk an' de fence-rail fillin,'
I'll marry you, ef you is willin'.'

"'That's it? Get her a dress, then, and bake the cake. But, Jack, which plantation are you going to steal from? mine or your master Frank's?"

"Jack burst into a huge guffaw: 'Lor', Mars Ot! I ain't gwine steal from na'y one, lessen dar's a camp-meetin' gwine on, sah. Den, you know, all on us is got to sheer de ixpense; an' sometimes we ain't got it, 'dout we kind o' borrers it. Which de folks we borrers from mout nat'rally call it stealin'. I don't blame 'em fer dat.'

"'And how often do you mean to beat your wife?'

"'Lordy mussy, Mars Ot! I wouldn' krek dat gal, not fer nothin' in de wurl', lessen she 'zarved it.'

"'Well, see that you don't. You may cut out now. And, Lucinda, see that you don't deserve it, for it's my opinion that you'll catch it if you do. Come, Hawthrone, the horses are at the door.'

"As we rode through the magnificent old woods I could not but be struck by the wonderful animal spirits, the exuberant life of my companion. Life! life! life! Every tone of his voice, every look of his blue-black eyes, every motion of his fine athletic figure, gave you the idea of life and the enjoyment of life. He whistled and sang and joked and laughed, till I saw that he appreciated the fact of his having nothing to do but to enjoy himself.

"He presently stopped at a bend in the creek along the banks of which we were riding.

"'Hallo, Uncle Jack! looking for yarbs!' This to the funniest-looking old negro you ever saw, who seemed to be stealthily peering about among the dead leaves and dry bushes. He appeared to be at least a hundred and fifty years old, was as black as ink, and wore a natural skull-cap of gray wool. The rest of him was made up of wrinkles and two little restless black eyes, set very close together for a negro, giving them an expression of extreme cunning. I was not surprised to learn that he was supreme among the negroes, especially as a 'trick-doctor,' conducting his rites with great ceremony and taking advantage of every opportunity to perform his outlandish tricks.

"'Yes, sah,' said he in reply to Ot. 'I'm arter yarbs fer de feber, which it will hit de plantashun naix dark o' de moon.'

"'That's the Christmas-log, I suppose?' said Ot, pointing with his whip to a dark object bobbing up and down in the water. Turning to me, he explained: 'The negroes have holiday as long as they can keep the Christmas-log burning, so the rascals usually get the biggest specimen of black gum they can find—you know what a fine grain it has?—and soak it in the creek about ten days; and, by George! there's no telling how long the thing will last.'

"'An' ef Death comes ter de plantashun while de log's a-burnin', all de niggers helps to squinch it, an' der ain't no mo' holiday, no mo' goin's on,' said Uncle Jake impressively, compressing his lips.

"'Is dot sho?' inquired Ot.

"'I a ain't nebber seed de squinchin' o' de log but onct, and dat were in Loozyanny more'n forty years ago. Dey calls it the "death-rain" down dar.'

"'I wonder if you'd all "squinch" the log and give up your holidays if Death should take me for a Christmas-gift to old master some fine morning?'

"'In cert'ny, in cert'ny, Mars Ot; but I hope you ain't gwine try us, sah.'

"Ot laughed, and we rode on.

"'I wonder, Ot,' said I, 'that you allow that old fellow to put such notions in the negroes' heads. Ten to one (from what I've seen of them), they will all fall ill when the moon wanes.'

"'Like as not,' said he carelessly; 'but their faith in him as a prophet, which makes them fancy themselves ill, is counterbalanced by their faith in him as a doctor, which will make them all well again; so you see it's as broad as it's long. Now, Hawthrone, if you will turn to the right and follow that road, you will have several capital views and a smooth gallop. I am going over to Hensley's to look at that mare, but I am going by the Devil's Path, and you might not fancy it.'

"I assented, and we parted, Ot turning in his saddle when he had gone about twenty yards to ask me to tell Herndon the overseer to meet him at the foot of the mountain at three o'clock.

"I delivered the message to Herndon, and at the proper time he set out, but the true word that is spoken in jest seemed in this instance verified, for he did not return till night; and when he came, young Hensley came with him.

"They sent for me to come on the portico. We stood talking a while: then I went with them a little way down the avenue.

"There were four of Mr. Hensley's negroes carrying a rough bier. On it rested a rudely-made pine coffin. A couple of other negroes held torches that smoked and flared and let fall great drops of blazing turpentine. They smoked and flared and seemed to struggle with the pale, uncertain light of the half moon; and the magnolia-leaves—I never hear the hard dry rustle of magnolia-leaves without seeing a rough coffin colored by the red light of pine torches, the heavy black some curling around and about, casting its sullen shadow over all—over the rough coffin and among the magnolia-branches, and into the faces of the awe-stricken negroes who held the bier."

Here the old man paused and looked thoughtfully into the fire, till some one asked him to go on.

"The news spread like wild-fire that Otway had been thrown from his horse while coming down the Devil's Path on his way home from Mr. Hensley's, and the place was filled with the wildest lamentations. I cannot assert that I ever witnessed what appeared to me more genuine grief than the negroes evinced on hearing of the death of their young master.

"The coffin was borne into the house, but remained unopened, young Hensley and Herndorn agreeing that the mutilated remains should not be exposed. Although the house and grounds were crowded with negroes, they were not allowed to enter the room more than two or three at a time. In some instances the scene was very affecting.—When his old mammy came in and dropped down by the side of the coffin (I knew she really had been faithful, and the boy loved her: his mother had been dead many and many a day,) she didn't cry: it was only a feeble, pitiful kind of whine. I—I felt sorry.

"After a while old Jake came in and asked that they might drench the Christmas-log and end the holiday rejoicing. Herndon gave permission, and the scene that took place that night was really pathetic. There were certainly not fewer than five hundred negroes present, men, women and children; and there were, it seemed to me, hundreds of pine torches swaying about in the crowd. Under Jake's supervision they had selected an open space in the forest, and dragged into it the half-consumed log, that looked like one, solid, living coal, and placed near it a huge vessel of water surrounded by moss and stones, which gave it the appearance of a natural spring. Here a number of them gathered and commenced a series of wild but apparently concerted movements of the most grotesque nature conceivable, throwing themselves into uncouth attitudes, their arms in the air and heads back or resting almost on their shoulders; using frantic gestures — bowing their foreheads to the earth, joining hands and dragging each other round in circles, to part suddenly, precipitating themselves almost into the flames—even their lips and eyes partaking of the strange contortions. I was amazed to find such a scene enacted in the nineteenth century.

"Then they began a low murmuring chant, exceedingly sweet and plaintive, and sung hardly above breath, yet so numerous were the voices that it must have been heard at a great distance; and as the sound was taken up, spreading like a wave, they began to file slowly before the Christmas-log, each one as he passed throwing on it a handful of water from the spring. Jack and Lucinda went forward hand in hand and helped to quench the now dying embers, but separated there and walked away by different paths, symbolizing, as I afterward learned, the postponement of their union.

"The death-rain had continued a long time, the glowing coals of the Christmas-log were growing black and lifeless, and the murmured chant was slowing dying away, growing fainter every moment, while the torches began to disappear, here, there, everywhere, one by one, in every direction, till there was little light left but that of the moon, which gave in indistinct outline the crowd of dark figures extending into the forest.

"'Oh, honey! honey!' cried Ot's mammy as she tottered up and the water fell in a tremulous shower from her poor old fingers—'oh, honey! Yo' ole mammy is done shed tears nuf dis day ter squinch de log. De def-rain for her boy is done put out de light in yo' ole mammy's heart.'

"'Hallo, mammy! don't cry. Your boy has come back,' said a familiar voice; and in our midst appeared a fine athletic fellow with blue-black eyes and a long moustache and a jolly voice, such as never dead man had; yet so great was the panic that many of the negroes fainted; great strapping cornfield negroes, men and women actually fainted from fright. Those who could command their muscles fled screaming from the place, and, as we afterward found, some of them ran till they fell exhausted on the road, miles away from home.

"But Ot gave them a rattling good time to make up for it. There was no end of fun for the rest of the holidays. Jack and Lucinda were married, and every negro within a circuit of ten miles came to the wedding. Ot declared that if nobody else would dance with his old mammy, he would do it himself; and he dragged her -she was as stiff in the knees as a pair of tongs, and as weak in the ankles as a month-old baby — he dragged her out on the floor, and twirled her around, and held her arms above her head, and made her trip up and down the floor, and bow her head and twist her back, and hop backward and forward, to the right and to the left, while she begged and prayed and laughed till her turban fell off, and we were all fairly shouting, and the old creature was too exhausted to remonstrate or laugh any longer. Ah, a jolly boy was Ot!"

"What became of him?"

"He got married, grew fat, and was a good family-nag the last I heard of him."

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