

DE CLAR PITCHER

BY

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IT was a spring evening. The wind, soft and fresh, was blowing down the city street, stirring the tender leaves of the vines that grew thickly over the houses on each side of the block. Lights were commencing to shine from the windows here and there, and where blinds had not been drawn, lamps of gay colors gleamed through the Queen Anne casements. The full moon rising cast the sharp shadows of the gabled houses on the quiet roadway.

Only at one place in the long square was a break, where a side yard gave room for the bright moonlight to vary the fantastic roof lines with lower shadows of gateway, with pillars and balls, trees and vines, clear cut in black silhouette on the silvery gray of the asphalt.

In one of the low doorways, around which the vine grew thickest, stood a lady, lingering in enjoyment of the lovely hour, the hour for memories. The soft air of the night, 'twixt spring and summer, had awakened her, and, leaning against the deep doorway in the sheltering vine, her thoughts were of bluer skies and brighter moonlight, of shadows of palmettoes and magnolias,

and great columns of a deep piazza, till there seemed to float toward her, far away, perfume of jasmine and echoes of happy laughter, with snatches of song, sung in the years that long had held them.

An unconscious sigh from her own lips broke her reverie, and she turned to enter her home, but the doorway opposite had opened and a figure came down the steps and across the street, where the light, shining through the side yard, showed her to be a slightly bent, medium-sized negro woman.

She held in her hand a little tray with a dish upon it, covered with a white napkin. She walked quickly, calling in the soft voice of her race, when speaking to those who have loved and cared for them, and whom they love with that unquestioning affection which was a part of old conditions: "Wait, Miss Annie, wait. I'se coming to see you p'intedly."

"Miss Annie" turned quickly to the half-breathless old woman.

"Why, Jane," she said, "is it you?"

"It's me, Miss Annie, honey, sut'n'y, I'se jes' bin a-takin' de wafers to ole Miss Peters. Miss Betty sed she'd bin

honin' for some, an' I hed bettah tek her sum of dis bakin', bein' as dey wuz extry good. I 'clar' to de Lord, Miss Annie, I hed 'tention to fetch some to you, but dem chillun jes' eats up ev'y-

going home?" for Miss Betty's girlhood home had been in the same little country settlement as Miss Annie's.

There they had romped and played as children, swung in the swings of wild grapevines in the woods, waded in the "branch," went together in the parties to gather the yellow jessamines, took long horseback rides along the river which divided their fathers' plantations, sharing always happily the pleasures of young girls in Southern country life. More serious hours, too, they had passed in common, mingling their tears when kept in for missing the terrible nines of the multiplication table, and the equally obnoxious French verbs.

Since those long-past days they had been friends, and now in the far-away city Miss Betty was a truly grieving widow with three little children, who, after a long winter of sickness, were all going to the mother's old home among the healthy pine lands, near which, in a truly God's acre, their father rested beneath the spring flowers.

Through all the joys and sorrows of Miss Betty's life Jane had been her faithful attendant, the mammy of baby days, the guardian of her childhood, often shielding her from just



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thing; since dey got well ob de illness, seems like I kyn't bake en'ugh wafers fur 'em."

Jane stopped a moment in her monologue, seeing which Miss Annie asked: "How is Miss Betty, and when is she

retribution for many a piece of girlish mischief.

Tears had washed the roses from Miss Betty's cheeks, but brown old mammy still served and comforted "her chile," kept the "chillun" in order and

resented any of her colored friends' solicitude who thought Miss Annie "dun gone off mightily," with:

"Huh! what's you talkin' 'bout. My chile's no common folks lookin' like ole nat'r'al poppies a-growin' in de fields. No, mam; she's jes' like de white rose a-climbin' on de back porch down home, whar I always sits a-mendin', an' min'in' the chillun. 'Course, when Mr. Frank he cum to see her in the old days, I don' say she warn't like the pink roses ole missis always cut herself fur to dry and mix up with de spice to make the parlor smell fine winter eve'ings. The pink rose mighty sweet and purty, but most every pusson 'lows de white rose is de finest, an', anyhow, I likes my chile bes' jes' de way she is. Mighty 'ristocratik lookin', pure white, not a-lookin' as if she'd bin livin' on cracklin' ever sence she's bin knee high to de drake in back yard."

"Her chile and de chillun" was the subject Jane always reached sooner or later. Now, to get everything ready for the journey to the old home was occupying her thoughts, and to this she returned after answering Miss Annie's questions regarding the affairs of the household in the few days that had passed since she had seen Miss Betty. All the preparations were recounted to the patient Miss Annie, who had come in for Jane's ministrations when with Miss Betty in the girlhood days, and it was of those days her thoughts had been busy in the retrospective moonlight, and to which they turned again as she listened in a half dream to the old woman's talk.

"Yes, Miss Annie," Jane went on, "yes, I'se a bin turnin' myself 'bout mighty quick dese last days, but I'se 'bout dun, everyt'ing's a'ready, an' I'se mighty glad I'se to hab a chance to sit down and rest 'fore takin' that long journey. Mighty tiresom' like, sittin' up all day and all night, bobbin' your pore old he'd, 'feared to go to sleep, thinkin' de 'ductor man, so proud ob de fine gold on his collar, 'ill cum along an' holler out: 'All de passengers change de kyars at de next station.' An' yo' jes' has to keep yo're min' set on de

baskits, and counts 'em all over, till jes' as you lets yo'reself think how good dat possum's goin' taste wid de sweet 'taters, fur you knows ole Sim's agoin' to track one down fur de furst Sunday dinner, if he has to stay out till de airly mawnin' light to fine him. An' den when you's jes' makin' yo'reself easy like, wid yo' he'd ag'inst de window and a-kinder tastin' de possum in de mouth, den, sho' 'nuff, de 'ductor man cum 'long an' hollers: 'All out fur de nex' station,' wid a 'hole lot of stuff I doan' understand. An' dere you is! An' de baskits an' de chillun ter git out in de hurry, fur de kyars dey doan' wait no time fur yo'. An', on course, I wa'n' goin' 'low Miss Betty to pick up dem heavy t'ings wid her purty han's."

Here Jane paused for breath, but Miss Annie said nothing. So, after a moment, she continued, in a very self-satisfied manner:

"In co'rse I has to say de white gemplemen al'ays helps me tote de baskits, mighty purlite to me, if I'se an ole black mammy. De berry las' time we wuz a-goin' home—dot wuz afore Master Frank died—a mighty fine, tall gempleman looked at Miss Betty an' tuks off his hat, wid his arm stretched out fur ez he bend ober wid de deep bow he made to her, an' he sed to her: 'Purmit me, madam.'

"An' den he handed me de big lunch baskit and anoder one we al'ays tuk fur de trabeling convenyces, as Miss Betty called a 'hole lot of things we had fur de chillun. And de piller fur dey naps, and de chillun's coats, an' all de oder things, an' den, las' of all, he cum back to fetch me my shoes, fur I'd slipped 'em off and clean forgot to git 'em, Mr. 'ductor hollowed out so awful quick to change kyars.

"Now, I'd jes' like to knows jes' what I'd dun widout dem shoes if de kyars hed taken 'em away, an' I sut'n'y wuz obliged to de white gemplemen when he giv' 'em to me, an' said, reel serious like: 'Here's your shoes, auntie,' an' I med him de lowest curt'sy. I knows how, an' some awful ill-mannered white folks in de kyar window dey laffed. Not's as I minded dere bad manners,

fur I knows what good manners is by my white ladies an' gemplemen. You knows, Miss Annie, I ain't one of dese colored gals a-combin' de kink out of dere hair dat de Lawd dun put dere, for I knows bettah den they do dat a buzzard is a buzzard, an' you can't make nuthin' but a buzzard out of a buzzard, an' I'se only an' ole mammy, but I'se

de san'itches in yore ear. When we wuz a-goin' home las' time, Miss Betty, she sed: 'Why, mammy, you looks a-hongry, maybe you'd like one of dese san'itches.' So she guv de boy a quarter, an' sez: 'Guv her a san'itch and some chok-late drops.' So I opens de paper the san'itch was all wropped up in, an' I 'clar' to de Lord, Miss Annie,



"You jes' drink dis cole water, honey, i'll make you feel bettah."

a respectable colored pusson, an' I raised my chile, Miss Betty, to be purlite, an' when dem folks laffed she jes' look at 'em an' dey stop, an' she sez to de gemplemen: 'You's very kind, sir,' an' he dun mak' annuder bow, an' den she smiled till her pretty, white teeth show, an' de kyars went.

"Tain't no pleasure nohow in dem kyars, Miss Annie, dem boys hollerin' out san'itches an' chok-late drops, it sorter mak's you hongry; jes' ez you wuz a-restin' an' thinkin' 'bout nothin' dey cum 'long an' meks you jump wid

dat san'itch bread was miserabile, an' de ham sut'n'y cum off de back of sum ole razorback hog. An' when Miss Betty warn't a-looking I jes' let it out de window, easy, an' den I tried de choke-late drops, and I giv' sum to de chillun to taste like—we calls 'em 'late drops, for short—and dey tasted real good, but de kyars wuz a-swinging mightily jes' den, and I felt a dre'dful misery, and de chillun dey got awful sick. Miss Betty was sut'n'y mighty sorry fur me, but she sed de chillun wuz greedy things, an' dough it stan's

to reason it wuzn't de 'late drops dun med me sick, I don' want no more.

"Yes, Miss Annie, we's a'mos' ready now, an' I se all ready. I se got de pitcher, too, Miss Annie."

"Got the pitcher, Jane?" inquired Miss Annie. "What pitcher?"

"Why, de pitcher Mr. Frank lik'd so much."

"Which pitcher?" asked Miss Annie.

"Why, Miss Annie, you knows dat pitcher; it's de pitcher I always brought de water in de parlor fur de company. You knows de pitcher ob de cl'ar glass, an' de dew cumms quick on de outside."

"Oh," said Miss Annie, "that's not a good pitcher to take, Jane; it will be broken in the lunch basket."

"Lunch baskit?" returned Jane. "Now, Miss Annie, I ain't no chile, I se got it wropped up in my trunk; no danger it'll get broke. I se tuk care of dat."

"You see, Miss Annie," continued Jane, lowering her voice, confidentially, "I ain't sed nuthin' 'bout dat pitcher to Miss Betty, but she doan' min' what I do, you knows dat, an' I jes' wants dat pitcher for a special purpose. You see, Mr. Frank wuz a-ailin' fur a long time 'fore he done died, but ebery day he always went out to bizness, an' he used to cum in, mighty tired like, an' he'd sit himself down to rest in de parlor 'fore he went upstairs to whar Miss Betty an' de chillun wuz.

"One day, come two years ago, he cum in lookin' so faint like I went wid-out his sayin' nuthin', an' got dis self-same pitcher an' let de water run an' run in it till it wuz real cole, an' den I tuks it into de parlor to Mr. Frank and sez: 'You jes' drink dis cole water, honey, i'll make you feel bettah.' So he drinks de hole glass full, an' sez: 'Mammy, it taste like de water from de spring at de foot ob de hill,' an' den he said, like to himself: 'Poor David,' an' I went studying all dat day what he meant about David, an' den I 'membered how David wuz awful thirsty, an' wanted de water from de spring he couldn't get to, an' dough I was sorter confused like, I somehow knew Mr.

Frank knew he warn't goin' to drink no more out de spring at de foot ob de hill at home.

"Ennyhow, Miss Annie, from dat day on, Mr. Frank, whenever he cum home, he looked fur me to bring him dat glass of water; de little tray and de glass and de cl'ar pitcher wid de dew on it. An' one time I wanted to see if he'd take notice, an' I puts anudder pitcher on de tray an' brought it to him, an' he sed: 'Where's the other pitcher, Jane? I don't like dat pitcher.' So I went quick an' brought de cl'ar pitcher, an' he drink de same as ebery day."

Jane paused, and after a moment Miss Annie, in a steady voice but lower than her usual tone, said: "That was very kind and thoughtful in you, Jane, but you would feel badly if you broke the pitcher Mr. Frank liked so much; it would be safer to leave it here until you come back in the fall."

"Miss Annie," said Jane, a little offended, but with much dignity, "you doan' know nuthin' about it, nor Miss Betty, neither. I se takin' dat pitcher wid a special purpose. You knows de Easter's mos' here, an' we'll be in de ole house when de sun rises Easter mawnin', an' dough I se a pore ole woman an' ain't got no frankincents an' mur to take fur a present, I se a-gwine to give sumthing to Mr. Frank. I se gwine to git up early dat blessed mawnin', 'fore de fust streak ob light in de east, an' if dese ole legs will tote me, I se gwine to de spring, at de foot ob de hill across de ribber, an' I se gwine to fill de cl'ar pitcher wid de cole water till de dew's all over it, and den I'll tote de cl'ar pitcher full ob de cole water to Mr. Frank's grave, an' not spill a drop til I gets dyar, and pours it out ober de grass an' de flowers dat's a-growin' ober de only gempleman my chile eber loved, and Miss Betty doan' know nuthin' about it."

The moon had risen higher while Jane had talked, and now shone into her earnest old face as she said her good-by, and, intent upon her purpose, went her way, while Miss Annie with misty eyes watched her pass into the distance of the night.