

Periwinkle House

By Opie Read

Illustrated by R. H. Livingstone

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The Old Man Hummed a Jagged Tune.

SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I—The time is the late '60s or early '70s and the scene is on the Mississippi river. All the types of the period are present and the floating palace is distinguished by merit, dancing and gallantry. There are the customary drinking and gambling also. Virgil Drace, a young northerner, is on his way south on a mission of revenge. He meets an eccentric character in the person of one Liberty Shottle who is constantly tempting the goddess of chance. They form a singular compact.

CHAPTER II—Drace gets his mind on his mission by entering into deck sports in which he exhibits an unusual athletic prowess. Liberty Shottle is again unlucky at cards and attempts a financial negotiation with Drace. The latter, seeing an opportunity to use Shottle, confides to him that his mission is to find a certain ex-guerrilla, Stepha la Vitte, who had murdered Drace's father. It is his determination announced to his new chum, to hang La Vitte as high as Haman. Drace has become enamored of a mysterious beauty aboard the boat.

CHAPTER III—The steamer reaches New Orleans, at that time in the somewhat turbulent throes of carpetbag government. Shottle becomes possessed of two tickets for the French ball, a great society event, and proposes that Drace accompany him to the affair. The young man attends and Drace unexpectedly meets the girl who had fired his heart aboard the steamer. She is accompanied by one Boyce, whose proprietary interest indicates that he is her fiance. Through stratagem Shottle learns that the name of the girl is Nadine la Vitte and that her companion of the evening is the man who is seeking to marry her.

CHAPTER IV—Drace passes an uneasy night torn by the suspicion that Nadine is the daughter of old Stepha la Vitte, now an admitted outlaw. Now, more than ever, he is resolved to find where the girl lives and to find Stepha. Drace and Shottle begin a search of the city. In one of their nocturnal pilgrimages they come upon a mob intent upon hanging a poor wretch from the limb of a tree. It is a typical carpetbag execution and aroused the resentment of an opposing mob of citizens. Drace takes a hand in the fight which starts and is instrumental in preventing the execution. From a window opposite the scene, he catches a glimpse of one he is sure is Nadine.

CHAPTER V—The escapade, the fight, the interference with the execution get Drace and Shottle into bad standing with the authorities, but instead of punishment are given until the next day to board a steamer bound north. Returning to the house where he thought he had glimpsed the girl, Drace finds the place abandoned. Through Colonel Josh, an emissary employed at the suggestion of Shottle, he gets a faint clue in the discovery that a certain Frenchman, a wine dealer, is reported to be an intimate of Stepha la Vitte. There is only a short time before the departure of the steamer when Drace and Shottle go to call on the Frenchman. The latter is too keen to be inveigled into giving up any information, but Shottle, spying around among the casks and bottles, especially the articles made up for shipment, makes an important discovery. So as not to arouse the suspicions of the Frenchman, he casually draws Drace away from the place and onto the steamer. On board he informs Drace that one of the cases was addressed to Stepha la Vitte at Fernum's Landing, Mississippi. It is the next stop below Bethpage's Landing and Colonel Bethpage is Liberty Shottle's uncle.

CHAPTER VI—Drace and Shottle are received with some hospitality by Colonel Bethpage and find the plantation and its environs delightful. After a brief stay and a characteristic financial transaction with the colonel, Shottle goes away ostensibly on a business trip to Vicksburg, but in reality to seek his favorite form of amusement. Drace makes the plantation his headquarters and from pieces of information gathered from various sources, becomes convinced that La Vitte has a haunt in a great wood of cypress and a tangle of salt cedar, a sort of everglades, a marsh with hundreds of knoll islands rising here and there among the bayous. A shrewd old negro had told him that the outlaw lived in a house built of periwinkle shells. Day after day Drace takes a canoe and goes farther and farther into the moss-hanging wilds. At his feet lies a rope, one end of it a huzzar's noose.

CHAPTER VII—Drace penetrates into the wilderness, discovers the periwinkle House and finds Nadine alone. She is much alarmed and warns him her father will shoot him. He makes love to her and to get him to go she agrees to meet him again the following Thursday. On his way home Drace is accosted by three men who ask to be set across the river. They overpower him and bind him with ropes. Led by Tony, they throw Drace into an old cabin. Tony taunts Drace and avows his love for Nadine, while the others collect fuel. Tony takes Drace to the cabin and the three go off laughing. And then his bonds are cut and with Nadine's help he gets safely out. She tells him how she was led to come to his rescue.

CHAPTER VIII—Drace gets safely back to the Bethpage place. The general writes him to accompany him to Natchez, where he is to address a teachers' meeting. At Natchez they go to old Toke Mason's tavern, under the hill, a famous place. There they drink summer-grape wine, listen to "The Arkansas Traveler," see the buck-and-wing dancers and have a dinner of doves and fat-in. Stepha la Vitte appears, insults the General by calling him a "Carpet-bagger." The General tells him he has Stepha, draws a dirk. Drace disarms Stepha, who leaves, vowing vengeance.

CHAPTER IX

With the first gleam of Thursday's light Nadine arose and stood looking out from the window. Her father had come in late and was to depart again early for the hills, but she was afraid lest he might have changed his mind. She heard him moving about, but she waited a long time before she went to meet him, so sweet it was to stand there at the window to catch the first ray of the sun.

The old man hummed a jagged tune; in a garden of melody it would have been a briar. Nadine came out, and gallantly he kissed her hand, laughing softly; and then as was his wont, he kissed her hair.

Her duties about the house were light, but he helped her, and when their queer assortment of plates and dishes, gold-rimmed china, crockery, stoneware and tin plate had been washed and put away, they sat in the shade of the house, the girl anxious and wondering.

"I have sent Tony back to the cecy, as I tell you I will," he said to her. "He does the good work to burn the spy, the carpetbagger. Now he has spree, with the red wine an' the white. When the time come, he be back. I have need of beam with the cattle that I buy. He drive them . . . Up to the town Natchez I have trouble. The ol' scoun'rel Bethpage! I go in the tav',

an' he is there, sing, laugh, eat an' look at the darky dance. I wait. Then I go up. We have words. He jump up. Then the young man, big, he grab my wrist like this. He squeeze. I say: 'Monsieur you ver' strong, I see you again.' An' when I do, I keel heem. I hear old Bethpage call him Vergeel. The old man I keel too, eh?"

"Oh, no-no!" she cried. "Let us go away somewhere. They will never let you alone. It will be better to be in the city than here."

"Just a little while longer we stay in this place, eh? Then we meet Monsieur Boyce in Memphis, an' you marry him, an' he take you away for the honeymoon, per'aps to France. An' he buy you the silk dresses, an' many beautiful things. An' then I come and join you, an' we all live happy-eh?"

"But-but I do not like Monsieur Boyce!"

"Ha! You learn soon. He is a fine man. Wait til we see him in Memphis an' you know him better. You will love him then, an' be happy. . . . I go now. Au revoir, ma p'tite."

Stepha went down to his boat, feeling that he had outwitted her impetuosity of the swamp, and she ran back to her room to gaze through the window. But soon she came out with a big leather-bound book of plays and put it on the ground beneath the caks. Then with a broom made of stiff twigs she swept the ground, unstrung a caterpillar swinging down and carried it away out of the range of her stage. From the house she brought a narrow strip of rush matting, spread it beneath a tree, raising one edge as if to form of it a sort of back, a sofa. From the house she brought a box, to serve for a table, and from out beyond the palisade of cane she gathered lilies, plucking from the bank a great bloom that looked like a trumpet. These she hung on the low-swaying branches of her playhouse trees, or with sharp thorns pinned them to the rugged bark, a curtain to drape the wall above her "pretend-like" divan. She sat down and waited a long time. The cane stirred, and she seized her book, opened where a lily-stem marked her favorite play, and made herself believe that she was reading.

It was only a breeze that rustled in the cane. She could hear it now, hissing amid the glossy leaves above her. Why should she be impatient? She could wait. Had she not waited night after night for her father's footsteps? Had she not sat in the house, alone and not afraid, when the storm tauged the tops of the cypress trees and lashed the bayou mad?

She had not heard a sound, but looking by chance, she saw Drace coming through the cane, and she sprang up to meet him, the play-book pressed against her bosom.

"Nadine."

"Monsieur!"

"Don't call me 'Monsieur.' Call me Virgil."

She dropped her book. He bent to pick it up, but she snatched it from beneath his reaching hand and stood back from him.

"Oh, it was you, then! It was you the so strong man that would break my father's wrist. It was you!"

"Nadine, it was not to hurt him. With a knife he would have killed an old man; and then they would have hanged him. Nadine, my other hand held yours, to protect you."

"It must be true. I will believe you—Virgil. I know you brave and not wish to hurt an old man. No, you could not do that. You will forgive me, yes?"

She held forth her hand and taking it tenderly, he touched it with his lips; and like a princess she accepted the homage due her rank and her beauty.

"Come, now, we play," she said, sweetly laughing. "And it must be free, like the boy and the girl. But first you sit down here and tell me."

She led him to her "sofa" and they sat down, leaning back against the tree.

"Tell you what, Nadine?"

"About the great big world you know so well."

"I don't know the big world, as you think it. But I know the universe as I feel it. It is here."

About her finger she sat wrapping her favorite play. Was it that she did not understand his reference to his universe? No, for she shook her head, and with a sigh that did not mean weariness.

"The universe could not be on this little island."

"It could be held in your dimpled hand."

"Oh, my hand dimpled!" She held it in front of him, touched his brow with the palm.

"It is not soft enough to be dimpled, Virgil."

"I would kiss it soft."

He caught her wrist, touched the tip of each finger with his lips and

then kissed the palm. She laughed, drawing back her hand.

"You must not do that. We must talk of other things."

"Yes, but first let me tell you of my dream."

"I do not like to hear dreams. We always forget them and make up something we did not dream. . . . But did you not tell me once?"

"No, I don't think so. In my dream you touched my heart with a torch and set it afire."

"But I would not do that. I would save you from the fire. Ah, and Tony he has gone to the city, but when he comes back, we must watch close. . . . One time he tried to take my hand, and he said he would kiss me. And I say: 'That may be, Tony. You can kiss me because you stronger. But when you have, then you be dead.' And he knew that I speak what was to come."

"We care nothing for him. Let him keep out of my way. . . . And when I saw you at the ball, I knew that you were the girl with the torch. And do you know what I said to myself? Let me whisper it to you."

"There is no one to hear."

"I said: 'You are to be my wife.' And just then you turned about and looked at me."

"But I did not see you."

"Come, now, you must have seen me."

"Well, perhaps. But I did not say: 'I am to be his wife.' No, I did not say that. And it cannot be, Virgil."

"But it is going to be, all the same, and you know it. Why, what is all this universe for if that is not to be? Why was this little island cast up here? Why did the word ring forth: 'Let there be light?' It is part of the plan of creation, and nothing can prevent it. . . . I shall have to wait, but I—"

"Will wait a long time, Virgil. But we must not talk like that. Come—let us forget such things."

She put her spell on him, and he was a boy again. Hand in hand they walked about, pretending that the acre island was miles and miles in extent. Time was a day-star shooting unseen across the sky, and then a heavy sentence fell upon him. It was time for him to go. In the cane she stood with him where his canoe was moored. He held her hand, drawing her toward him, but she took it away.

"No-no, you must not. . . . Quick Virgil, you must go now. The sun is low."

CHAPTER X

In the night, in that hour of self-reproach which comes to us all, Virgil awoke in a rage with himself. He had been dreaming, had seen himself in form of purpose, without character. Back to Highland Bruce he traced his ancestry, and was he to be the first of his race to prove degenerate, to trample upon the memory of his father, to loil in stupid love, to give his soul to a creature far beneath him in birth and schooling, a girl whose father had murdered! Out of bed he got, and bowed with the weight of shame, walked the uneven floor, for his slow steps were doddering.

"Caught in an instant, a fly in a speck of jelly, and have never been able to get free," he reproached himself. "Even Liberty Shottle, the slave of cards and dice, can see my weakness and must laugh at me. But by the God in Heaven it shall not be. In this land there is no law. I bring my own law with me, my oath, and a smile and a word of flattering love bade me put it aside, and I let it slip from me. Now I must redeem myself."

He stood at the window. Gamecocks were crowing the dawn, a courageous challenge to all the world. No, there would be no weakening now. The sweetest comedy had been played.

Swiftly he dressed himself, stole downstairs, out of the house, down to the river. There was no boat, but no matter, he would walk to Willow Head. Realizing that it was yet too early for the execution of his grim purpose, he halted at a wayside place, ate breakfast and waited for the sun. Then not in hurried haste, but deliberate in strength, he walked on to Willow Head, crossed over, found his neglected rope where, in a hollow stump in backsliding weakness he had hidden it, buttoned it beneath his coat and strode down into the swamp.

It was a long way to his canoe near the Muscadine Isle, and then a long pull to Periwinkle house, but there was time enough. Stepha would not go away till Thursday. Ah, he would go away no more, for now on Tuesday he must settle with the spirit of Alfred Drace.

Mists hovered about, but the island was in a blaze of light. Silently the canoe silt the satin water. Silently he landed. Determined vengeance may pick its way as softly as eager love; and in the cane, sharper of whisper now that the weather was cool, he made not a sound. Out into the open he peered. No one within sight. On the bark of the live oak were the dead flowers of yesterday. There in the shade was the box that had served as table, once so prettily strewn with violets.

In spite of his vow of vengeance and his hatred of Stepha, these things caught at Drace's heart, shook his fixed purpose of action. For many minutes he waited—no sign of Stepha, of anyone. And then his blood leaped; for soft hands suddenly blinded him from behind, soft laughter bubbled over at his astonishment. And dark thoughts and dark purposes fled on the wind as he caught Nadine and hugged her close.

"Now for your punishment!" And he kissed her.

"Oh, you must not again. . . . Virgil, I cannot like you when you are rude. . . . You must not!"

"I don't want you just to like me. . . . You do not? Then I will try not to. . . . Come and sit down, Virgil. You worked so hard for your kisses you must be tired. . . . How did you guess?"

"Guess what?" he asked as she led him to the sofa and he sat gazing entranced as she captured and imprisoned her guerrilla bands of hair.

"That Father and Tony had gone hunting today. But they may be back at any time, Virgil. You must not stay."

"But I must stay; you hold me prisoner. I must stay until you love me as madly as I do you."

"As madly as you do me? That might not be so much mad, Virgil. But why should I love you?"

"Because you are to be my wife. We are engaged."

"Are we? I did not know that. Why you not tell me sooner?"

"I did, and now you must know it."

"But I did not. Then I must be stupid, yes?"

"The whole universe is stupid if it denies it. The angels are stupid if they fall to see it."

"Oh, you must not talk like that. It is worse than swearing the big oath. . . . And I am to be your wife, Mrs. Virgil! Then what do we do? Go about and sing with the fiddle?"

"No, we go to the beautiful places on earth and look upon them together. We—"

"No, no, you must not think like that. You take my father by the wrist and he hate you. . . . And I do so wrong to see you. I am the sinner, but I believe that the Blessed One, she ask for my forgiveness. . . . No, Virgil, we can only play together and then . . . It will live in the mind, our childhood here. . . . My father is not well all the time now, and I must be good to him. . . . Only I must see you, sometimes. That is the only wrong I do him."

"For I—I love you. . . . I did not want to tell you, but I cannot keep it all the time down in my heart. . . . I dream of you all of the night, and I kneel down and pray that you always love me. . . . There, I have told you so much. And I kiss you, too. . . . Now—you may stay for a little time, and then you must go."

Boy and girl they played, not from the book but from love's ever-varying text. In his canoe they paddled afar off where the lily-pads paved the surface of the pond. They landed on a knoll where was spread over persimmon saplings an arbor of muscadine; here an adventurous catbird had her nest of young. She cried and fluttered about in great alarm, but when she saw that they were not her enemies, that they caught grasshoppers to feed her brood, she sat high among the vines, calling her mate, the muscadine, and here he came, scared at first, but when she had explained to him he sang his melody, ending with the catcall whence comes his unpoetic name.

The sun had been speeding, and went behind a cloud. Fear seized Nadine, and taking Virgil's hand, she urged him toward the boat.

(To be Continued Next Week)

PARKPLACE

Mrs. Clara Rosebraugh

Miss Marie Ericson arrived last week from Sweden, and is the guest of Mrs. Felth, an old friend. Miss Ericson reports that the English language is extensively taught in the schools of Sweden.

Mr. and Mrs. W. D. Reames and children, with Mrs. Carl Butts, motored to Portland, Saturday.

Mr. Klyce and children of Portland were Sunday guests of Mr. and Mrs. Herman Kruger.

A special meeting of taxpayers of road district No. 33, was held in the Meindl store on Clackamas Heights, Saturday night, with I. D. Taylor acting chairman, and H. O. Rosebraugh, secretary. A plan was adopted providing for the improvement of the road with base from the south end of Clackamas bridge to Cape Horn, and the improvement of Abernathy road as far as the levy will allow. It was voted to levy a ten-mill tax, \$1,200 of which is to be used on the Clackamas road, \$1,000 as an emergency fund for the district, and the balance for the grading of Abernathy road. This proposition was carried by a vote of 38 to 10.

Wm. Smith and family were guests at a family Thanksgiving dinner, at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Norris, of Oregon City.

The regular meeting of the Grange was held in the school building, Friday night. The report of the building committee was laid on the table until the next meeting. A committee was appointed to confer with the trustees of the church relative to renting the Sunday school room for Grange purposes.

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The ladies of the Grange will meet at the home of Mrs. Maude Glass, Friday afternoon, to sew for the bazaar.

The girls' basketball team of Park-place defeated the West Linn team, Friday afternoon, by a score of 33-to-4.

CLARKES

Albert Gasser

The Booster's Club held a meeting last Thursday evening at the hall. A committee of five, consisting of the following: Albert Gasser, J. D. Marshall, Roscoe Gard, A. Oldenburg and Ed. McIntyre, were appointed to draw up a budget and tax to be voted on at the same meeting. The committee recommended that a ten-mill special levy be raised and expended equally on the five side roads, which recommendations were adopted. The next meeting will be held December 30th. The road meeting was held Saturday and the Booster's Club recommendations were read and, upon motion for adoption, were voted down.

George Clarkes was an Oregon City visitor recently.

Albert Schiewe as a Portland visitor, Friday.

Otto Gasser recently arrived home from a week's visit with his brothers at St. Johns.

B. Berger marketed a load of hogs in Portland last week.

Leichtweis Bros transacted business at Molalla last Friday.

Mr. and Mrs. Katy of Bozeman, Montana, are visiting with Mr. Katy's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Katy.

B. Sullivan was a Portland visitor last Friday.

Miss Helen Duff has resigned as superintendent of the Sunday school.

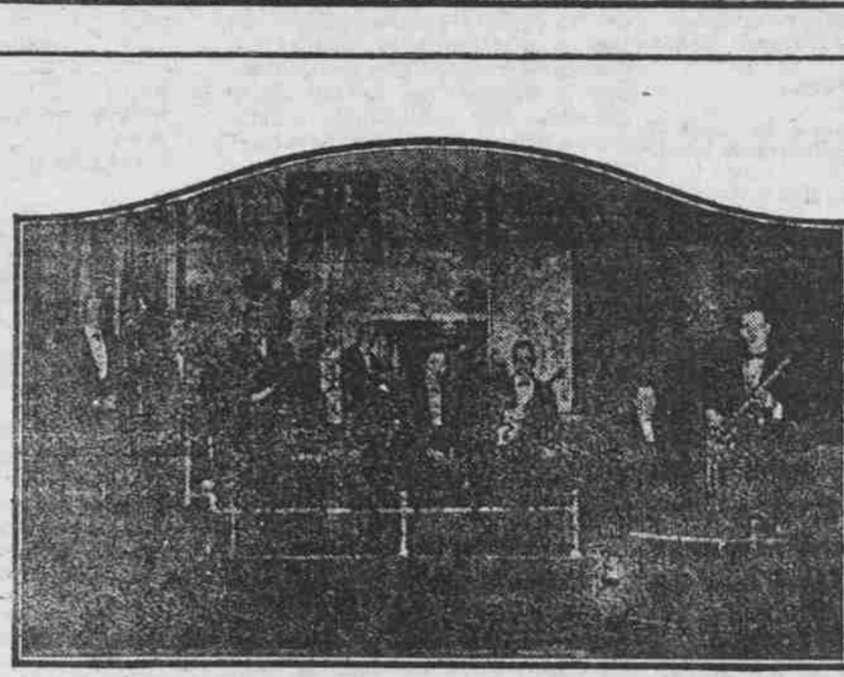
Thanksgiving Is Here and Will Soon Be Past.

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