

The mocker in the myrtle

By
Florence Kerigan

The Bread David Cast
Upon the Waters
Came Back to him
After Many Days...
When he Needed it
"Pow'ful
Bad!"....



Granddad called,
"I want to tell you—
all a long, ram-
blin' story about
when I was young
and the mockin'
bird was singin'
in the crape
myrtle!"

David turned and looked at the speaker. He was the overseer of the Rutledge plantation, and a hard man. David's father had often said he would never sell him one of his slaves, nor one of his horses—not that he abused them, exactly, but they did the maximum of work for the minimum of food and care. He went to the platform and beckoned the boy closer. He ran his hands over his shoulders and thighs.

"Not very husky," he commented.
"Best wukkers sometimes that wiry kind," the auctioneer pointed out, which was true in that hot, humid, bayou country.
"Give you eighteen dollars fo' him," said the overseer.
"Make it eighteen-fifty?"
"Eighteen's mah final bid, suh."
"Sold to this—"
"I give twenty for him," said David, suddenly. As one man the crowd turned and looked at him. He felt Jed's eyes suddenly averted.

TEN minutes later David was riding home, owner of a black boy his own age, instead of the colt he had yearned for. They rode slowly, the new possession scuffling along in the thick dust behind them. David turned to Big Jed for the first time.

"What'll mother say?" he breathed.
Big Jed smiled slowly. "It was your money, Marse Davy. Reckon she can't say anything—much." He turned in his saddle. "Boy! Here!" The boy came toward him, his eyes going to David's face. "Look at me." As he came between the two horses which had stopped David saw that the boy's jaw was quivering and his teeth were all but chattering. "What's your name?"

"Jake, suh."
Jed looked at him for a long moment. Then he turned to David. "Better take him up in front of you," he suggested. "Looks to me like he's got a bad dose o' fever."

By the time David reached the door Jake's uncontrollable chills shook his whole body and his teeth chattered so that more than once the horse turned his head in mystification to see what was happening.

Mother came out on the porch as Big Jed lifted the boy down, and Dad came from somewhere also, fanning himself with his hat. He stopped in amazement.

"I—I bought him," said Dave, suddenly feeling condemned in his father's eyes. Of what he was not sure.

"You—you—well, you young fool!" gasped his father.

Mother came forward, her curls swaying about her pink cheeks, and compassion in her eyes. "The boy's sick! Put him in the back room until we can find a cabin for him. Chloe—Evezeret—"

"You should hear him whistle, Mother," said David, lamely, and she turned and looked at him, then laid a hand on his shoulder.

Somehow, there was no mocking bird singing, but he had the illusion of one in his heart. Mother didn't say anything, but he knew she was not angry—even approved perhaps, just as he knew in some strange way that his father had not been exactly displeased, either. He went in with Evezeret and Chloe. After all, Jake was his property now.

Jake attached himself to David with the pertinacity of a leech. He thought himself some kind of valet and bodyguard, and his solicitude was embarrassing. On stormy evenings or when the days dragged he was a welcome visitor at the big house. He could dance with lightning swiftness and do funny stunts with his feet that made them all helpless with laughter. He was a born mimic, too.

THE days passed swiftly. Days with the song of the mocker running through them like a bright metal thread, nights with the Spanish lace of the moss silhouetted against the pearl of the bayou. David went north to West Point, and came home, handsome in his new uniform. Jake outdid himself polishing his boots, shining his spurs and keeping his buttons gleaming. Jake was every bit as big and straight as Dave, now. No longer the scrawny boy Dave had bought, but a husky six-footer.

Then came the bombshell of the war.

There was only one thing for David to do. "Dad," he tried to explain, "can't you see? I'm an officer! I've my commission from the federal government. I've sworn to uphold the flag. I can't turn my back on those vows!"

"Sending you to West Point made a dam' yankee of you, did it?" his father sneered.
"You know it hasn't, Dad. But it has made an American of me! I've pledged myself to uphold the Union."

"Mississippi is no longer a part of the Union. She has withdrawn."
"Then she did wrong. My allegiance is first to my country, and then to my state."

"Just because some hysterical woman wrote a book that—why, Davy, you know we've got to have slaves. You know they're just darkies. Free 'em, and then what? The country would be overrun with beggars. The southern plantations would be bankrupt, and men like me would be paupers! You know we can't afford to pay all our darkies wages! You know they wouldn't know what to do with it if we did! We take care of them when they're sick, feed them, clothe them, most of us educate them. We're decent to them in spite of what that—that—woman says about us!"

David sighed wearily. "It isn't that, Dad. As a matter of fact I didn't read it. The big issue is breaking away from the Union. I can't stand for that!"

"So what are you going to do?" asked his

father, acidly.

David moved to the window and stood looking out into the velvety blackness that reflected only the room behind him and himself, and his father standing by the fireplace watching him.

"And so," he said quietly, at last, "and so, Dad, I'm leaving tomorrow morning. I have a commission and I'm taking command of my regiment on Saturday in Philadelphia."

His father clenched his hands. "You're leaving tonight!" he shouted. "And you'll never come back. Understand? You choose to fight against the Cause and you're no longer a son of mine!"

David sighed heavily. "At least, there are no hard feelings, Dad? You understand—?" He held out his hand appealingly, but the older man ignored it. He pulled the tasseled rope at his side and when Evezeret appeared he looked at David coldly.

"Evezeret," he said, "show this—gentleman—out."

It was down at the end of the garden by the sundial that his mother caught up with him. She floated along over the dark grass, her white gown billowing around her, reminding him of the hollyhock ladies Emmelinda used to make.

"You understand, don't you?" he begged.
"I understand you both," she sobbed. "After the war—when we have won—he will be generous, Davy. Come home then—"

"I'll write you, Mother," he promised.

A late moon sailed high in a choppy sky when he came out of the Rutledge house. Emmelinda had promised to wait. More than that, if the war lasted more than a year she promised to come to Philadelphia to her cousin's and be married to him there.

Jake was waiting outside with two horses. David rode in silence for a long while, not at all surprised that Jake came with him. But as dawn streaked the eastern sky he thought it best to send him back.

Jake shook his head. "Nawsuh, Marse Davy. I belongs to you. I'se goin' where you goes. Yassuh!"

So when David took his command Jake was with him as orderly.

MONTHS melted into months, fused into one mass of misery by the heat of war. His men distrusted him because of his accent. His mother had not written. Mail was not going through the lines, he realized. His father had not attempted to get any word to him. Even Emmelinda had failed him, he thought. Only Jake remained faithful, following him about like his shadow.

They moved south in the spring—the heart twisting southern spring—and fought a pitched battle among the laurel and rhododendrons and stained the red azaleas with their redder blood. Once in the lull of battle there came a sudden silence when no shells shrieked and no cannons boomed, and through the sunlight, misty with smoke, came a few notes of a mocking bird singing somewhere in the brush. It brought back to David in an overwhelming nostalgia the scent of the jasmine, and the marble whiteness of the magnolias, and the sunlight in his mother's curls.

It was then that a Confederate soldier got him. David had seen him in time to shoot first, but hadn't been able to bring himself to do it with the song of the mocker still ringing in his ears and echoing in his heart. He went down without a sound.

He moved, and a pain shot through him. The moon was shining down into his face, which was wet. Deft hands were exploring his body for the wound, and then squeezed a sponge of cold water over his face again. He spluttered, and a familiar voice whispered, "Marse David! Thank de Lawd you ain't daid. You ain't, is you?"

"Not—" the effort was too much for David, and he lapsed into unconsciousness again.

He felt himself being carried unevenly, hovering between consciousness and unconsciousness. A voice was saying over and over with monotonous repetition, "Jes' one mo' step, Lawd! Jes' one mo' step, Lawd! Jes' one mo' step, Lawd! Jes' one mo' step, Lawd! Pain, and moonlight, and the song of the mocker.

The sunlight streamed across his face. He was calm and comfortable and still, in a soft white bed. A doctor was looking down at him. "All right now? Thanks to that black shadow of yours! He brought you in!"

The war was over. Jake and all the other slaves were free. David went home to a father willing to receive him—but it was a bitter homecoming. The former slaves stayed on, but the plantation was practically bankrupt.

Emmelinda married him against her father's wishes, but all his former friends ostracized him. He was no longer one of them, but a dam'yankee.

"It will wear off," Emmelinda told him. "We can live it down."

He thought so himself. Through the perilous days he stayed on. He took part in the social life of the community, helping to reconstruct a strong fabric out of the broken threads. He joined the other white men in an attempt to keep order among the liberated blacks who were not able to handle their new found liberty. They discovered to their cost that

any rash act carried dire penalties at the hands of hooded and masked avengers.

ONE day in a roundabout way the news came to David that on a trumped up charge the mob was coming for Jake that night. David hurried home, and when the mob arrived they found that not only Jake had left, but David and Emmelinda also. David's last cent had taken Jake north.

"Marse David," Jake said, taking the money unwillingly, "some day I'se gwine pay this all back. I'se wishing, Marse David, I can pay you back when you needs it pow'ful bad!"

David smiled a little at the rather dubious good wishes, and then he gripped Jake's hand hard. He could not speak, for the song of the mocker was in his heart again, swirling up into his throat and choking him. Strange—for there was no mocker singing anywhere in the still night.

Years passed. Emmelinda's children grew up and married. Emmelinda died, and he thought his life would end then, but it did not. He lived on, a fine old patriarch on his Long Island estate, for the years had been kind to him. Then without warning, the market crash, two bank failures and—

"Well, Granddad, we have the southern mansion still!" Emmelinda, his granddaughter, had told him gaily. "It will give my eyes a rest, too, to go down there for a while."

He had no illusions about the mansion. He knew what it was to be land poor. He knew that under capable overseers the plantation had barely cleared taxes each year. But there was nothing else to do. So they went there.

Emmelinda's eyes grew steadily worse. A specialist said only an operation could save them—and they had no money.

"Never mind," said Emmelinda soothingly. "Doctors don't always know."

She said it bravely, and did not know that her grandfather's eyes had seen keenly. Down in the village there was a young telegraph operator who had come since the last war. He had come to the house a number of times. David knew that one night he had asked Emmelinda to marry him and she had refused to leave her grandfather, and to saddle Joe with a bride who was going blind.

"I'll pay for the operation," Joe had said recklessly.

"Hush. It would mean a trip to a big northern hospital and specialists and hospital bills. It would run into hundreds of dollars, Joe. I can't let you do it."

David, hearing, had sighed and wondered whether Emmelinda understood that, after all, this life was a little thing, and pain and sorrow wore away after a while. Pain of all kinds, heartbreak and bereavement and the high courage of renunciation. But he wished he could give her her eyes.

THEN one morning a strange thing happened. An envelope came addressed to him, and within it was a thin green check for a startling amount. The check was signed "E. Lee," and the note which accompanied it, also signed "E. Lee," said simply, "In payment of an old debt with interest."

It meant Emmelinda's eyes!

For some reason he did not tell Emmelinda right away. He wanted to think it out first. He knew no E. Lee. He could think of no unpaid debt, except—nonsense! Jake was dead long ago, probably. And if not, how could a colored man get that much money to give away?

Joe and Emmelinda were sitting by the window. They had turned on the radio and listened to the program they both liked—the Plantation Singers. David liked it too. "Granddad," Joe said suddenly, "did you know that the Plantation Singers are in town in person? Uh-huh! And is there class to those darkies! Boy! That's funny, too. The girl who sings the contra alto solos is named Emmelinda. She was in the telegraph office today to send a telegram to her grandfather and signed it that way. She told me her grandfather used to live here at Magnolias. He's always talking about his 'Marse Davy,' she said. The others laughed at him, but she was thrilled to death to come down here and see the old place."

"What's that you say?" asked David.
"Emmelinda Lee, her name is. Her grandfather is Jake Lee."

"Ah!" said David, and smiled.
Jake! . . . And it had come when he needed it "pow'ful bad." The mocking bird in the crape myrtle suddenly opened its throat and poured out all the music of the world in a thrilling burst of ecstasy, but the song was in David's heart long before that. He seemed to hear his father's affectionate gruff, "You young fool!" He heard Jake's voice, "One step mo', Lawd! One step mo'." He remembered his Emmelinda. The song of the mocker!

He leaned forward. "You two kids come out here," he called. "I want to tell you—all a long, ramblin' story about when I was young and the mockin' bird was singin' in the crape myrtle!"