Periwinkle House

By OPIE READ

ILLUSTRATED BY R.H. LIVINGSTONE

SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I.—The time is the late '60s or early '70s and the scene a steamboat on the Mississippi river. All the types of the period are present and the floating palace is distinguished by merriment, dancing and gallantry. There are the customary drinking and gambling also. Virgil Drace, a young northern man, 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 off 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, Stephe 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 men attend 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 Stepho la Vitte, now an admitted outlaw. Now, more than ever, is he resolved to find where the girl lives and to find Stepho. 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.

(Continued from last week.)

"That case of wine was addressed to Stepho la Vitte at Farnum's Landing, Mississippi. That wine is going to Stepho on the Bumblebee. And so are we!"

An hour later Drace sat with Shottle on the deck of the Bumblebee, watching the ever-changing panorama of the Mississippi and musing upon the sudden shifting of his quest.

"Liberty," asked Drace presently, "how far up is this Farnum's Landing? Do you recall it?"

"Yes," said Liberty. "I know this river. Farnum's Landing is—by golly!" he exclaimed, breaking off, "Farnum's Landing is the next stop below Bethpage's Landing! And General Bethpage is my uncle! We'll go there."

"But," Drace said dubiously, "he's not my uncle, and I'm afraid it would be intruding somewhat on his hospitality to—"

"Nothing of the sort," averred Liberty. "Any friend of mine would be doubly welcome. You can't know much about the General. Taming, now, but he used to be the most remarkable character, in a quiet way, along the river. And when I tell you about him, Virgil, you'll laugh. Before the war he was professor at Newsome, a little college up in the scrub-oak country. He entered the army as a colonel and came out as a brigadier."

"I don't see anything to laugh at in that."

"No, but wait. He had considerable money, and at times used to come down to New Orleans to enjoy himself. On one occasion he lost all his money at roulette."

"Still nothing to laugh at."

"No? All the property he had with him was a bodyservant, a Guinea negro named Dip. So what does he do? He says to the proprietor of the gambling house: 'I wish to play this negro, sir.' 'All right; I'll take off the limit and let you play him. How much is he worth?' says the gambler. 'I don't want to play his value in money, but him, I tell you,' says the General. 'Say the word, and I'll bet him on one of these numbers.' He had been losing every bet, and the proprietor knew that it would be safe. So he says: 'All right, go ahead.'

"The General wasn't sober, so he calls the darky and says: 'Dip, stand here with your forefingers on number twenty, right here.' The darky did so, and they turned the wheel, everybody laughing. Well, sir, if twenty didn't win, the world is a puffball! Won, and the owner of the place turned pale! He knew that he'd have to pay or close up his house. So he says: 'All right, get at his value, and I'll pay the bet.' 'Value!' cries the General. 'I didn't bet his value, but him. I want thirty-five Guinea negroes. Size them up to him.' "

"What a farce!" commented Drace.

"Was it? Well, I reckon not. They had to go out and buy thirty-five Guinea negroes. It took quite a while, but the General waited. And when they had all been sized up, the General went up the River, with his thirty-five Guinea negroes trailing after him."

Now Drace could see the picture of it, and he laughed. This was the man he was going to visit!

The Bumblebee was jointly owned and operated by Major Pewitt and a young fellow named William Hawkins. It was a fine steamer, but while it was cunningly masked as a public carrier, Shottle was quick to discover that it was in truth a nomad gambler, profuse in entertainment that taxed not the giver. But the entertainment sought by this pelican, as the gamesters termed Shottle, was not of wine from France, the fish-egg from Russia or venison from America's native woods, but spades, hearts, diamonds and clubs. And while the Bee still lay at the wharf, breathing low and blubberously through her nostrils, Shottle had put in operation a quickly contrived "touch," presenting himself to Major Pewitt before he had taken the time to introduce his friend to that well-known character.

Now, however, Major Pewitt strolled up; and Shottle, keen to get to the gaming table, introduced Pewitt to Drace and then a moment later himself slipped away.

"We are on our way to visit Shottle's uncle, General Bethpage," explained Drace.

"What, my old friend and fellow-soldier, Bethpage! Never a nobler man drew sword in defense of what he conceived to be right. If you like a genial atmosphere and a company that never tires, you will remain with him as long as possible and still too short a time. I earnestly hope that you may find inducement to settle among us."

"Possibly I may. I like the River. I like the study of character. In character there is all history, all philosophy, all—"

"Just so," the Major agreed. "And we have some remarkable characters here, sir, and some of the most beautiful women in the world; to some people it may appear a little singular, but interesting character among men always develops in an atmosphere producing beauty among women."

"And naturally, Major, you are acquainted with both characters and beauty. And by the way, did you ever meet an old fellow—let me see, what is his name? Oh, I think they call him

Stepho — something. Oh, yes — La Vitte?"

The Major cleared his throat and gently laid his hand on Drace's shoulder.

"My young friend, they have told you about the most implacable and desperate of men, sir. I know the man, and while nature did not intend—and I beg your pardon for what might seem a want of modesty—that I should fear any human being, yet I confess to an occasional uneasiness in the presence of old Stepho la Vitte. I have never had any words with him—that is, strained words; but if I should, I'd await no move on his part but shoot him instantly. Ha, I wish you to meet my dear young friend and much esteemed partner, William Hawkins."

Drace was much taken with Hawkins, his quiet manner, his athletic mold, and passed some time with him in talk, the Major having given to Hawkins a scheming wink.

The boat was now fluting her ruffled way up the river. At a table beneath a great shaded lamp, Shottle sat, not alone, not staring into vacancy but into the expressionless countenance of

The Major Cleared His Throat and Gently Laid His Hand on Drace's Shoulder.

men merciless in vivisection. Luck at first had cajoled him, let him swell the fifty he had obtained to near five hundred, but a yellow-looking swab of whiskers entangled with him and leeched him down to twenty-five. Shottle looked at him, his caterpillar eyebrows, heard his slight hacking cough, his request for a glass of ice-water, and said to himself:

"One of these days I may have a chance to set fire to you as I would any other patch of dead grass."

Slowly and with an economy painful for him to practice, Shottle with many ups and downs built up again toward two hundred; but at length in the afternoon an old citizen who sat high and who looked like a steer, hooked him and horned him broke.

Shottle came stumbling over the doorsill and found Drace in conversation with Major Pewitt and William Hawkins. With a wink the Major enjoined a humorous silence, and mutely they sat attendant on the loser's mood. Shottle sat down, took out a card, wrote on it, put it back into his pocket, tapped his teeth with the pencil and spoke:

"I have just written a resolve, and whenever I do, it becomes a law of my being. It has just been enacted and recorded that never again on this earth am I to bet another cent. I may go to houses where there are card parties, but never again am I to shuffle a deck. My career as a fool is ended . . . Who was it that wrote, 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try again'? A prison sentence would be too good for the hatcher of such a fallacy. If at first you find you're wrong, quit. That's my course for the future."

"I congratulate you. But what are you going to do?" Drace inquired.

"I will drag a surveyor's chain and squint at the landscape I'll lug a tripod and eat a raw turnip in the wind. Or, if compelled to be humbler, I can curry horses."

"And bet some fellow that you'll have your horses curried first," said the Major.

With his pencil Shottle slowly tapped his teeth.

"The first squirt of cold water generally comes from one as much afflicted as yourself. But no matter. Cold water chills, but at the same time it cleanses. And from this time on, gentlemen, Liberty Shottle, the vague and unreal, will become the obvious and the actual. If I had a thousand dollars right now, I wouldn't bet that the sun will rise tomorrow. Oh, there is such a thing as redemption."

CHAPTER VI.

About four o'clock in the afternoon the Bumblebee passed Farnum's Landing, and later touched at Bethpage Landing. From the crest of the high embankment was an endless view of spreading cane fields. The General's house stood in the midst of old trees near half a mile from the river. Leading from the landing was a road in the perpetual shade of low-branching live oaks. Along the road wild poppies blazed in patches of sunlight, and in the shade glowed the color of darker blood. In clumps of feathery grasses insects sang, while from everywhere came the low and drowsy murmur of the cane.

Drace was enchanted with the scene, the sweet air. Beside him Shottle long-legged his way, his neck stretched out.

"Yonder comes Uncle Howard, the General," he said.

Toward them, with a slow but firm and emphatic step, came a tall, spare, erect old gentleman; and as he drew nearer, Drace saw that he wore a mustache and whiskers trimmed neatly down to a sharp point. The soldier within him predominated, the professional soldier, who is often gentler and more kindly than the volunteer. Shottle hailed him, and he quickened his pace.

"Well, well, Liberty Shottle! Welcome, sir, and your friend—"

"Uncle, this is Virgil Drace, my best friend."

The old man straightened, held out both his hands and made Liberty's friend welcome most hospitably.

Now they walked toward the house, the General with his hand on Drace's arm. Over the yard fence poured a stream of hounds, and an old possum-dog "barked up" Shottle as if he had treed. The double hallway doors stood open. The General conducted Drace into the library, a room that looked big enough for a tennis court. Then he hastily withdrew, and Shottle spoke:

"Gone to find Aunt Tycie. You'll like her. No hickory tree sap is any sweeter than her disposition. She was a Shottle, my father's young sister. She's young, as I told you. And she looks younger now than when she married. Did you ever notice that when a young woman marries an old fellow, she always tries to look younger? Here they are."

Presently the great plantation bell on a tower in the yard rang time for the evening meal. The General arose, and bowing to his wife, gracefully offered her his arm. To Drace it was a pretty ceremonial, and he contrasted it with the more brusque customs of everyday life in the North.

When an opportunity offered, Drace inquired of the General, as casually as possible, if he knew anything of an old fellow named Stepho la Vitte, who was reputed to live somewhere in the vicinity.

The General seemed somewhat surprised at the inquiry. "Yes," he said, "I know something of him. And I believe there are rumors that he is sometimes seen across the River near here. During the war he was a guerrilla and cast much blame on the Confederacy. I met him once, after the war—near your father's house, my dear. My mules were tired, and I had halted in the shade to let them rest, when up came two men; one put his hand on the wheel of my buggy and said that my mules were his—that they had been stolen from him. I laughed, but meantime I had the muzzle of a pistol between his eyes. He didn't flinch nor wink. He looked at me and said that he may have made a mistake. I told him I thought he had. Then, taking his hand off my wheel, he bowed himself back and said that he would see me again, to apologize. But I haven't seen him since."

In the evening how still and sweet was the air! From the quarters came the weird drone of the negro's chant, for the habit of the slave had not fallen with his chain. In the parlor Aunt Tycie sang, in this house a custom to be dreaded by the learned ear; but Drace's ear was not learned; Shottle's was as an oyster-shell clapped to his head; and in music the General could not distinguish intention from accomplishment. It was a song of love, "Hast Thou No Feeling to See Me Kneeling?" and when its last note had found a dark corner wherein to die, Drace requested her to sing it again. She gave him a grateful look; the General smiled at him; and as the song began again to mourn its way, Shottle said to himself:

"If Providence will lend virtue to a scheme, that will cost you money, Virgil. Came here to rest after going through more than Stonewall Jackson could stand, and this is what I get! Oh, it's respectable and ought to be endured, and so is a casket lined with satin, but it doesn't suit me. Lord, but this atmosphere is unsympathetic!"

If you have patience to wait, bedtime always comes; history is strewn with bedtime. It came slow-footed for Shottle, but quickly enough for Drace, with his nerves of steel wire. And how delighted he was with his room, a museum of antiquity, a great four-poster bedstead with a canopy heavy enough to have served as deadfall to some medieval giant. A chair that looked like the oaken throne of an ancient Briton, a wardrobe wherein Bluebeard might have hanged his wives, a rough-hewn mantelpiece reminiful of a beetling cliff—these were featured in the light of a hanging lamp big enough to turn the ashes of a cremated dragon.

The night was warm, and through the windows the air came cool and lulling from the Gulf; but Drace lay until daybreak before he slept, and when he awoke the noontime bell was ringing. A negro knocked to tell him that dinner was ready. The General and Tycie were seated, but Shottle was not at the table with them; and following Drace's look of inquiry, came explanation from the General:

"I gave him the five hundred dollars that he was to put in with the five hundred furnished by you to be invested initiatively in that cotton-bagging factory at Vicksburg, and he took an early boat for that city. I think it is a fortunate thing for the South that they discovered a wild plant, a sort of jute, really better for making ropes and bagging than either flax or hemp. I had seen nothing about the discovery, but I am not a very close reader of the newspapers. But Shottle assures me that this wild jute can be grown on the poorest land and that it needs no tending. I am naturally cautious, Virgil, and I did not myself invest, but backing your judgment in the matter, I loaned Liberty five hundred. When do you expect active operations toward building the factory?"

Tycie forestalled Drace's answer:

"Oh, I am sure it will succeed, and it will be a great thing, especially for Liberty. He has tried so hard, but somehow his energies haven't been properly directed. And he is so capable!"

She was so confident, and so hopeful for her luckless kinsman, that Drace played protecting villain to Shottle's purposes.

"Well, I don't know exactly when they are to begin work, but soon, I trust."

She gave him a grateful look for his trust, now perfectly assured of Shottle's useful future. But the General did not appear to be easy in his mind, and a little later when he and Drace were walking about the yard, beneath the trees, he referred again to the investment. Drace would have shuffled away from it, but the old gentleman cornered him with a question:

"I want the truth. Did Liberty lie to me?"

"Yes, sir, he did."

"I began to think so the moment he left me. Well, it is a singular thing,

"I Want the Truth. Did Liberty Lie to Me?"

that when he is with me, I believe in him, but the moment he is gone my faith has gone with him. I have had much experience with men, Mr. Drace, in the army and elsewhere, but my wife's nephew is the most—I don't know how to define him. Let me thank you for protecting him in the presence of my wife, and I regret that I may have seemed in doubt. But Drace, that fellow makes me angry with myself. Confound him, he almost convinces me at times that I have no stability of character. And yet I am fond of him. I am always glad to see him come. And let me say that he illustrates one truth very clearly—that ability consists mostly in the fervor with which we go at a thing. I suppose he has cost you considerable."

"Oh, not very much. I am fond of him too, and I believe he is going to be of much help to me."

"Well, I've lost five hundred this morning, but I can stand it. I have ordered the mules hitched up, and am going to drive with you about the plantation. I am going to show you a government here in the delta."

During the drive the old gentleman was talkative, sometimes with the school man's hesitating precision, but more often as the free companion, agreeable rather than discursive. Drace evinced in everything a keen interest, but it was not real. His heart was not with him. It was in New Orleans, in a narrow street where boards were nailed across a door.

From what he had been able to gather from the General and by talking in seeming idleness to boatmen and to men along the River, Drace confirmed the information snatched by Shottle from the label on the Frenchman's wine case—namely, that old Stepho had a haunt somewhere in the neighborhood. A shrewd old negro had said that the outlaw lived in the swamp, in a house built of periwinkle shells. On the opposite shore, and several miles below the General's home, there lay a great wood of cypress and a thick tangle of salt cedar, a sort of everglade, a marsh with hundreds of knoll-islands here and there rising among the bayous. Here was indeed an outlaw's paradise, for Drace was told that not nearly all its lanes and crooked byways of brown water had been explored. Herein he began his search for old Stepho, day after day penetrating farther and farther into this moss-hanging wild. He did not confide in General Bethpage, for his mission was sacred unto himself alone, and by himself alone must it be accomplished.

At his feet in the canoe lay a rope, one end of it a hangman's noose, and he smiled at it, grim and firm of faith. Sometimes his canoe would stall in the carpet of scum. But he forced his way through into a narrow and unobstructed channel. Now he paddled swiftly. In front of him a great alligator arose and sank, the canoe grazing his scaly back. With a shriek great birds flew, flapping low, their long legs stretched out behind them. Drace was armed with a revolver, but did not wish to fire it, caution warning him. When he ceased for a time to paddle, how still everything was!

The adventurer liked to feel that no one had ever been there before. But now suddenly something caught his eye. In the green tangle on a low bank he saw a pole with wires strung to it, a sort of gate. The wires were covered with vines, trained about them. But for what purpose, here in this brushy tangle? He caught hold of a weed and pulled the canoe up closer, took hold of the pole and now he found a lower slat to which the wires were also attached. Farther along he discovered a sort of hinge attached to a snag almost hidden by briers.

"I'll open this gate and see what lies beyond," he mused, drawing the canoe back to the other end. He pulled at the pole, and it yielded. The gate opened, and through the weeds that appeared to have been bent by the passing of a boat, he saw a narrow channel.

It was easy enough to shove through the weeds and to enter the new canal. Soon it broadened, winding about among the enormous cypress trees. Now he came upon a widening that looked like a millpond, except that in the midst of it arose an island of tall cane. It was an attractive sight, and he ceased paddling to look. Slowly he drifted toward the island's shore. He took hold of a cane root and pulled the nose of the canoe hard into the bank. Then he got out, parting the stiff and stubborn cane in a shade as dense as night. But now through this parting hallway he could see sunlight beyond, and knew that he was about to come into an open space. And out into it he looked with a start; for there, a few feet from the edge of the fringe of cane, stood a small house made of minute shells cemented—periwinkles. Its roof was of thatch, the long rushes gathered from the swamp; and about the door was a cypress vine, its red blooms dazzling in the sun. And then a bended cane Drace held was crushed in his hand, for through the door and out beneath the vine came the barbaric rose-maid, Nadine la Vitte.

CHAPTER VII

She did not take fright when she saw him. She was startled, but did not run into the house; she stood dazed, her marvelous eyes in wide stare. Slowly he came forward, gazing, his hat in his hand. He dropped the hat, stooped, caught it up and now stood before her.

If she were agitated, he could not discover it. She stood where the red blooms brushed her brow. He held forth his hand, and slowly she shook her head.

"Monsieur, how foolish to come! If you do not go now, in a short time you will die. My father! He will shoot you. I should like it not to see you dead, you are so brave. My father, he will think you come for him."

"But I will tell him that I did not. I—"

He moved nearer, but with her hand raised, palm toward him, she motioned him away.

"You do not know what you talk. Nothing could you tell him, for the gun fire, and you will be no more. Please go away now."

"Oh, it is because you want to get rid of me."

"No, no, no. It is not that. I like you much. You are so brave — and handsome. It is because I fear for you. My father would be angry to have me talk with a northern man. Go now, and for my sake, come no more."

"Mr. Boyce," said Drace then, "is not a northern man?"

She shot a sudden startled look at him. "Mr. Boyce—but he is my father's friend. My father expects me to marry Mr. Boyce. And if my father

Through the Door and Out Beneath the Vine Came the Barbaric Rose-Maid, Nadine La Vitte.

should come back and find me here talking with you, he would—Please, Mr. Drace, go at once, before it is too late. See, the sun is almost set. The stars come soon, and then through the cane he come. Oh, won't you please be kind to me and go at once!"

"Kind to you? God bless you, I would die for you."

"Oh, you make love soon! But won't you please go now! Quick, I hear something."

"You hear my heart. Let me stay ten minutes, and then I go."

"Ah, but why would you give me ten minutes of fear?"

He saw that her anxiety was real, and his heart smote him for cruelty to this dazzling creature whose father he would hang with a rope brought from the North.

"Yes, I will go. I wanted to tell you something, but my regret at going is so deep that I forget what it was. But I must come again when the sun is not so low. No, tell me please, when that shall be?"

(Continued Next Week.)

Of the 530 men and one woman who are at present members of the house of representatives and the senate, more than 300 are lawyers.