

Periwinkle House

By Opie Read

Illustrated by R. H. Livingston

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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 sat musing over the strange creature who had just left him, but soon his mind flowed down another channel, far different from a whim or an amusement—his mission in the South, secret, grim and desperate. But life on a river steamboat in that day left little time for brooding for, a few moments after Shottle left to risk his liberty and Drace's hundred, a roustabout thrust his head in at the door and announced that down on the deck there was to be a throwing and tying match. The big freeman of the Leona was about to encounter Vicksburg Joe for the championship of the River.

In an instant Drace was on his feet, all his instincts keen and ready to jump. He was something of a boxer and wrestler, but he had not been taught in this peculiar art of tying an adversary once one has thrown him. And there was that in his mind which made the acquisition of this knowledge seem to him desirable indeed.

As he joined a group of men making their way below, he overheard the Colonel, Miss Lucy's admirer, explaining the gentle pastime. "Tying a man once you have thrown him," the Colonel was saying, "is the climax of prowess. I saw Cal Bladgett throw and tie the Mick Parva at a barbecue at Mount Zion campground, and I have cause to remember it, for the young lady I went with deserted me for the hero, sir—actually stuck flowers into his hair. Here we are."

Two enormous fellows were struggling, while nearby lay a convenient rope. Finally Vicksburg Joe tied the freeman, and he lay helpless, unable to get up.

"I will give you five dollars if you can throw me and tie me that way," called Drace to the victor when the excitement had a little subsided.

Joe looked at Drace a moment. The young man looked powerful enough to be dangerous, but—five dollars was five dollars. He smiled, bowed, spread out the wrinkled rug and took Drace by the hand to lead him forth. To the astonishment of all, Drace threw Master Joe; but he could not tie the champion.

"Show me how it's done," said Virgil, "and I'll give you the money." For a long time, and until the Colonel and Shottle were worn out with waiting, the two struggled; and so apt was the student that he succeeded finally in turning the master over and tying him. But it seemed that the burly champion was too willing, and Drace insisted on another fall. And now, though the struggle was genuine on Joe's part, Drace tied him. Still more, another five promised, and Virgil was willing to quit.

"Finest sport I ever had!" he said as he turned away to the upper deck again to avoid the questions and congratulations showered upon him.

Drace was musing—not, it must be confessed, upon the serious purposes which had brought him to the South, but upon that girl of the red roses—when Shottle appeared again. Liberty stood in his presence, not with a droop but straight in the manly resolution to discharge the duties an adverse fate had thrust upon him. In the belief that it would make him look more like a slave, he now wore his coat turned wrong side out.

"Master, I salute you," he remarked. "All right," said Drace. "But turn your coat. I want my slave, the grinder of my mill, to appear respectably clad. You may sit down."

"I thank you, sir." "You didn't last long."

"No, master. The tangled-haired hag kicked me sidewise, like a cow. In only two pots! But what can you expect of a man that has an ace-full beaten? How long can a man preserve his freedom at that rate? And a fellow with a spindle chin and a nose no bigger than the average wart beat me with four jacks. Crushed me! And he would have crushed Julius Caesar just the same. Well, after all, freedom has many responsibilities. As a slave I'll cultivate what virtues I can get hold of, and look toward old age and a cabin on the hillside. And now, as it is natural for every man to hide his degradation, will you please to call you Virgil in the presence of other people?"

"I thought you didn't believe in the natural thing! But all right; I grant your request. And now I suppose I'd better give you some pocket-change. It isn't well for even a slave to be broke."

The slave's face brightened with hope. "You couldn't make it as much as five dollars, could you?" "No, thirty cents."

Shottle took the money and sat drooping. Drace gave him a cigar, and they smoked for a time in silence. At last Shottle looked toward Drace, his face glistening with the whimsical humor that had hitherto possessed it.

"Master," he said, "I don't want to be inquisitive, and if I'm prying into what's none of my business, I won't mind your saying so. But I want to be a faithful slave, and I can serve you best if I know what—what are my master's purposes in life. For example, was there any special reason for your learning to throw and tie that way? Is there anybody in particular I could help you to put the rope on?"

Drace made no answer for a moment, but bent a searching eye upon his new servant. Somehow the man's soul seemed to shine transparent in his face; and through it Drace saw sincerity; moreover the longing of youth for comradeship was strong within his lonely soul and won him from reticence.

"Liberty," he said, "did you ever hear of a man named Stepho la Vitte?" Liberty nodded. "Yes, I've heard of him; they say he's an outlaw, a smuggler."

"And worse," said Drace. "He's the man who—Liberty, give me your word, your oath, that you'll keep this a sacred secret!"

Liberty gave his word and his oath with a certain quaint dignity, and Drace went on:

"Liberty, before the war my father, Alfred Drace, was manager of a line of steamboats on the Ohio. In his employ was the creole Stepho la Vitte. After a time it came to my father's knowledge that Stepho was not only dishonest in ordinary dealings but had been guilty of piracy along the Gulf coast. And so my father dismissed Stepho from a position which the creole's dishonesty had made lucrative and valuable to him.

"Just after that," Drace went on, "the war broke out. La Vitte became a guerrilla—one of the men of Quantrell's stamp, who kept out of the army but who gathered in bands and lived by rapine along the border. I was only a little boy, Liberty, when La Vitte's band of guerrillas crossed the Ohio near Cincinnati and raided the little town where we lived. But the horror of that night still burns like a flame in my brain, Liberty."

Drace stopped, drew from a breast pocket a card and handed it to Shottle. On it was written in bold black characters: "Stepho la Vitte, with the compliments of Alfred Drace's son Virgil."

Shottle read the card, then looked inquiringly at Drace:

"Liberty," the young man explained, "those guerrillas under La Vitte burned our little town and killed nearly every grown man in it. For word was brought of their coming, and the men—nearly all of them married men or old—who had not gone to the war seized weapons and went out to defend their houses.

"They were massacred almost to a man. . . . And it was not plunder alone that led them to choose our little town for outrage, Liberty, but a passion for revenge. For next morning my father was found hanging to a tree. And on his breast was pinned a card that read: 'Alfred Drace, with the compliments of Stepho la Vitte.'"

Liberty looked again at the card he held in his hand, then handed it back to Drace. "I reckon I understand now, master," he said. "You are hunting this Stepho to—"

"To hang him as high as Haman and to pin that card on his breast," declared Drace passionately. "While my mother lived, Liberty, I could do nothing. You know how women are in such matters. But—she died this spring, Liberty, after long years of grieving for the man that a—d out-law foully murdered. Now I am free

to strike for my honor and my father's memory—to carry justice to that murderer."

With an awkward gesture Liberty stretched forth a hand, caught Drace's and wrung it warmly. "You're like—like Hamlet!" he exclaimed. "I'll do my best to help you, Hamlet. Let me be your Horatio as well as your slave."

Drace returned the fervent hand-clasp. "My Horatio!" he agreed. And then, solemnly, he added: "It's a worthy cause, Liberty. It's not alone my private vengeance, but the wrongs of a whole community that the ordinary machinery of justice can never right. Why, Liberty, dozens of men were murdered by those drunken fiends; little children were trodden under the hoofs of their horses, and women—near our house, Liberty, an old couple live in poverty. At the time of Stepho's raid their son and his young wife lived next door to them; they were well-to-do and prosperous. The day of the raid the son had received ten thousand dollars from the sale of some lands. When rumor of the raiders came, he hurriedly hid the money somewhere in the neighborhood, scribbled on a piece of paper the location of that treasure and gave it to his wife before he went out with the other men to fight. Next morning he had been shot; and the young wife had been carried off by those devils—her child with her, after the Indian custom, to keep her from suicide. No one knows what became of her. Nor has that money ever been found. Liberty, if I could find Stepho, get him in my power, I believe I could at least learn what became of that poor young woman—possibly find that paper and learn where to find the money those poor people so sorely need; for once, some years ago, a mysterious fellow was caught digging about their yard. . . . But I've talked enough, Liberty. Action! Do you know any more about La Vitte?"

"Not much," replied Liberty. "I believe he is often seen up the River, and sometimes down on the coast. He has his friends, and nearly everybody else is afraid of him. So you—we must keep dark till we get our chance. And you mustn't show your feelings in your face. Remember, master, you're just a young man out to see the world. H'm—here comes Colonel Josh. Suppose we talk to him. He was a mule-buyer in the war and may know something about Stepho."

The door was darkened. In came Joshua Mortimer, the man whom Miss Lucy had plied with questions concerning Drace. He had dodged in for a smoke, he said, when Shottle had introduced him to his master, and it was evident that it was his aim to impress Drace with his military bearing. He had not been actually in the army, but had acquired the title of colonel from his adventurous work of buying mules for the Confederate government. The Colonel "took it" that Drace was from the North.

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The door was darkened. In came Joshua Mortimer, the man whom Miss Lucy had plied with questions concerning Drace. He had dodged in for a smoke, he said, when Shottle had introduced him to his master, and it was evident that it was his aim to impress Drace with his military bearing. He had not been actually in the army, but had acquired the title of colonel from his adventurous work of buying mules for the Confederate government. The Colonel "took it" that Drace was from the North.

"Yes, but some of my people were from the South."

"Ah! I congratulate you, sir. I have

to strike for my honor and my father's memory—to carry justice to that murderer."

With an awkward gesture Liberty stretched forth a hand, caught Drace's and wrung it warmly. "You're like—like Hamlet!" he exclaimed. "I'll do my best to help you, Hamlet. Let me be your Horatio as well as your slave."

Drace returned the fervent hand-clasp. "My Horatio!" he agreed. And then, solemnly, he added: "It's a worthy cause, Liberty. It's not alone my private vengeance, but the wrongs of a whole community that the ordinary machinery of justice can never right. Why, Liberty, dozens of men were murdered by those drunken fiends; little children were trodden under the hoofs of their horses, and women—near our house, Liberty, an old couple live in poverty. At the time of Stepho's raid their son and his young wife lived next door to them; they were well-to-do and prosperous. The day of the raid the son had received ten thousand dollars from the sale of some lands. When rumor of the raiders came, he hurriedly hid the money somewhere in the neighborhood, scribbled on a piece of paper the location of that treasure and gave it to his wife before he went out with the other men to fight. Next morning he had been shot; and the young wife had been carried off by those devils—her child with her, after the Indian custom, to keep her from suicide. No one knows what became of her. Nor has that money ever been found. Liberty, if I could find Stepho, get him in my power, I believe I could at least learn what became of that poor young woman—possibly find that paper and learn where to find the money those poor people so sorely need; for once, some years ago, a mysterious fellow was caught digging about their yard. . . . But I've talked enough, Liberty. Action! Do you know any more about La Vitte?"

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LEGAL NOTICES

In the County Court of the State of Oregon, for the County of Clackamas.

In the Matter of The Guardianship of the Person and Estate of Oliver Sims, an Insane Person.