

The Devil In Armor

Queer Circumstances That Caused Him to Save a Sinner

By Charles Wisner Barrel

It was early morning, and Captain Lafayette Chesaby of Chesaby Hall, Southern Virginia, filled an easy chair on the cool veranda overlooking his broad fair acres. There was not a cloud in the pale blue sky. Bright sunlight flooded the fields and shone again in the myriad globules of dew which sparkled on every green leaf and blade of grass. Down in the clump of weeds by the roadside a mocking bird was rehearsing its invocation to the day. In fact, all the world seemed fresh and glad.

But the master of Chesaby Hall did not reflect the general serenity. He held a small nickle button between his thumb and forefinger, and his face wore a perplexed frown. He was wrestling with a problem in circumstantial evidence. He had come across that button a few moments before, lying just within the wine closet in the hallway behind him, and he was now puzzling to place its owner.

Though the captain himself was only a casual imbibor, it was only his policy to deprive his friends of a cheering draft when they dropped in to pass the time of day and estimate on the coming crops. And so it happened that the door of the wine closet in the airy hall, near the niche where stood a suit of burnishing armor—much the most ancient and venerable of all the family heirlooms—fairly bulged with the good things that contributed so much to the comfort of a quiet afternoon gathering of cronies. A snap-catch alone barred the way to this treasure vault, for the house-servants were deemed fully trustworthy, and the captain was not one to offend the free and easy atmosphere of the ancestral homestead with significant keyholes.

But of late telltale stains had decorated the polished floor both within and immediately without the closet, and on a certain morning a tumbler had been found on the table, which gave forth a suspicious and fragrant odor. Captain Chesaby had noted these signs of meddling fingers out of the corner of his eye, but said no word. At first he gave it only passing thought, taking it that one of the servants afflicted with a sudden cramp or chill, had mixed himself a toddy, but the following day fresh stains had appeared and more whiskey disappeared, and so it had continued until the Captain, thoroughly provoked, had made up his mind to give the miscreant a lesson. It would never do for him to allow such loose methods with his own particular and peculiar property, nor the indiscriminate use of liquors among the irresponsible in his charge.

So, watching and taking care to give the culprit no cause for alarm, at last that morning he had been rewarded with a clue; for upon opening the door of the wine-closet on his way through the hall a few moments before, a round, bright nickle button had gleamed up saucily at him from just across the sill. Making haste to transfer it to his pocket for further investigation, he guessed instantly that it belonged to the mysterious tippler.

And now, as the Captain sat there on the veranda, trying to place its owner among the two score workers on the plantation, of a sudden the light dawned upon him. Why, it was Uncle Roscoe, old Uncle Roscoe, the family butler and senior deacon of the local African Baptist church! That button looked marvelously like the set which adorned the old fashioned olive-green coat which he delighted to call his "lib'ry," given him by Captain Chesaby's father before the war and cherished thereafter by Uncle Roscoe always as his choicest possession. He would not have deemed that any meal could have been properly served upon the place without himself in his "lib'ry" at the helm as master of ceremonies. His pride in it was most touching, and in spite of its years of use it was still in fair and spotless condition.

The picture that the old servant made in it now rose convincingly in the Captain's mind and his brow tightened with the stress of his thought. What should he do? How should he apply the lesson he intended to administer? He had not the actual proof of the old man's guilt, and as he sat there in his chair, speculating on the right course to pursue, he suddenly caught sight of Uncle Roscoe himself crossing the lower part of the yard on the way to the well, with a water-bucket in his hand and his green coat on his back, for it was nearly breakfast-time. The master leaned back comfortably in his chair, assumed a non-committal expression and called in his laziest tones:

"Roscoe! Oh Roscoe! Run heah, suh!"

He was gazing absently out over the fields when the old negro at length shuffled up the steps and stood before him, a respectful half-grin upon his ebony features.

"Roscoe," said the captain monochalantly, "do yo' know Major Yancey's boy Mink?"

Uncle Roscoe raised a bony hand and scratched at the roots of his wool thoughtfully for a space. "Wull, suh," he said, looking up, "yo' see, Maj' Yancey got 'bout fo' Minks: Mink what drive de fambly carriage, Mink what do de plowin' 'n' ol' Mink, what doan de mufin 'cept set around. But I reckon I knows de hull er 'em, suh, 'n' dey's all hones' niggers, 'cept dat younges' one, de waitah, I doan' f'ing much er 'im, suh. I heerd tell ez how he done dip inter Marse Maj's co'n licker 'n' lay en de fiel' drunk mos' two days. He ain't much, suh, I knows dat."

The Captain coughed suddenly to hide a smile at the old man's earnestness. He had decided to treat him to a little scare, so that if guilty he might take warning and mend his ways without the Captain resorting to drastic measures.

"He's the very one I mean, Roscoe, the butler. I guess I'll have to drop in on the Major tomorrow and see if I can't get hold of Mink. I'm looking around for a good butler now, yo' know."

Uncle Roscoe gave a sudden start and clutched spasmodically at his chin. "Fo' de good Lord, Marse Lafe!" he ejaculated, "how yo' is talkin'! Yo' lookin' fo' a butlah? Lookin' fo' a butlah? Why, honey, don' yo' know dat I done sa'Ve yo' happy his meals right et de ve'y same table dat sets en de dinin'-room dar long 'fore de wah? Don' yo' know dat? 'N' I guess de Chesabys den days was de people to know a good butlah! I mought git ol' 'n' creaky en de j'nts, but I knows how t' sa'Ve a meal, suh, yit! 'N' dat Mink nigger," he sniffed contemptuously, "dat Mink nigger, why, he's de orneryes' butlah on dis side de Jawdon!"

"Oh, yess," the Captain broke in, "I know about that—he's a rival of yo's. But yo'r getting' too old, Roscoe, yo'r losing yo' grip. I'll have to talk it over with yo' mistress."

As he spoke, the Captain's eyes wandered casually up and down the two rows of nickle buttons which betrayed no sign when they beheld one missing.

It was ten o'clock that same morning when the Captain's wife and her daughter Sally drove away to town in the family turnout, and shortly after dinner the Captain himself got down his fish-poles and tackle with much ostentation and betook himself in the direction of the spring branch which idled along half a mile back in the woods.

Just about this latter time a keen observer might have detected a foxy little grin of satisfaction playing about the mouth of the senior deacon of the African Baptist Church, as he rubbed a damp rag over the front windows of Chesaby mansion. His good wife, Aunt Dilsey, was at work in the kitchen, but the other house-servants had dispatched their duties and retired to their quarters. An air of deserted tranquillity hung about the manor-house.

Captain Chesaby struck out over the back lots, crossed the collard-patch and a field of corn, and skirting on his way a neighbor's goober-

patch, finally reached the friendly shelter of the tangle which marked the bank of the spring branch. Here he lingered only long enough to secrete his pole in the canes and catch his breath. Then he turned right around and went back the way he had come, taking care not to be seen by any of the dusky workers about the place before he reached the house and slid out of sight through the back hall-door.

It was rather dark in there and he stood a space, mapping his damp brow and neck and cooling off his brisk jaunt in the hot sun. He could see through the open door, down to the road, where Uncle Roscoe, with one foot upon the hub of a dilapidated wagon, was conversing with the Rev. Shadrach Potter. From all appearances the wine-closet had not been visited as yet. He listened intently, but no sound except the droning voice of the preacher and the switching of his mule's tail came to him.

Captain Chesaby tiptoed cautiously down the hall. In its niche by the wine-closet the suit of mail reposed grimly, a savage insurmountability seeming to brood over the barred helmet and down-drawn beaver, which had once inclosed the head of a cavalier ancestor on the fields of Naseby and Marston Moor.

The Captain grasped the armor firmly about the waist-line, lifted it from its place, and hurried as best he could into the silent parlor. The warrior for whom it had been designed must have been of just Captain Chesaby's height and bulk, for what did that same late Confederate officer do but lay off his linen coat and wide-brimmed hat, remove his shoes and proceeded to don the odd and unwieldy apparel—an act accomplished only after many pulls and clanks and when the Captain's favorite expressions of disgust were about exhausted. The last and most uncomfortable thing of all to go on was the helmet, the beaver of which he pulled down so as to conceal his face effectually.

Then he walked stiffly and creakingly back to the hall, climbed into the niche and assumed a position as nearly akin to the one the armor usually bore as was possible. His work had been attended with no little noise, but Uncle Roscoe was so fully occupied in following the steady current of talk which flowed from the lips of the preacher that he heard not a sound.

Slowly the minutes dragged by, slowly they lengthened into fives and tens, and faster and ever faster oozed the perspiration from the Captain's pores; but still the crafty old butler lingered over his pious confab. At last, when the master was nearly sweltered, he heard Potter's whip crack over the drowsy mule's back and the rickety wheels of the cart began to revolve.

"I rely on you, Br'er Roscoe, t' lead the flock en prayah nex' meetin'!" Potter called as he drove away.

Shortly after, a stealthy step on the veranda made a loose board squeak, and a dark wily face peered around the door-jamb and took a minute's reconnaissance of the hallway. Then came Uncle Roscoe's whole body. In one hand he clutched tightly a punch of mint, the bruised stalks of which filled the sultry air with pungent odor. In the other he carried a gourd of cold well-water. Moving carefully toward the closet to avoid slopping the contents, still more carefully he bent down, rested the gourd against the base-board and softly drew open the door.

Now Uncle Roscoe's fame as a julep-maker was widespread, and the old fellow himself shrewdly suspected that pink-nosed Colonel Booth, the Hon. Jimmy Dikes and Major Yancey talked more "crops" than was at all necessary at Chesaby Hall during "julep season." But as he disappeared into the wine-closet he resolved to make a concoction this time that would totally eclipse any former attempt in the same line.

Directly Captain Chesaby heard the whisky spigot turn, and the purl of falling liquid. Then a short silence, broken at last by a gulping gasp, a smack and a muttered exclamation: "Um—m—m—ah! Dat suttenly do knoek de hotness outen de bones! Um—m—m—m—um! Dat tas' lak' mo'!" The spigot turned again.

About a minute later Uncle Roscoe emerged from his retreat, glass in one hand, gourd in the other. He closed the door behind him, and stepping nimbly up to the suit of armor, raised his glass and said softly and tantalizingly:

"Heah! look heah! Ol' Blun-erbuss, don' yo' wish yo' e'u'd feel dis nice col' julep runnin' down yo' neck?" He shoved the glass up till it nearly touched the helmet, laughingly childish, and continued: "Don' yo' jes' wish yo' e'u'd? But yo' can't—no, sah! Unc' Roscoe hain't gwine t' waste no clean licker on yo' rusty ol' throat; de only t'ing yo' kin do, ol' man, is ter smell de settl—!"

The sentence ended in a shriek of mortal terror, for Captain Chesaby, with a deep groan, bent forward and caught his wrists in an inexorable grasp. To the frightened negro's mind it was as if an avenging thunderbolt had fallen from the Judgment Seat to annihilate his guilty soul. As he wriggled and writhed about, the ridges in the steel gauntlets scraped and lacerated the skin on his wrists. A ghastly pallor, reaching to the very roots of his wool, overspread his face, and in terror-stricken, quaking tones he pleaded for his life.

"Don't hu't m-me, good Marse Debbil! I se on'y a po' o-o-ol' shif'less niggah. —I—hain't nebber sland'ed yo' befo'—M—Marse Debbil. I hain't nebbahtalked ag'in yo' befo', Marse Debbil! I hain't nebber prayed ag'in yo' in chu'ch like some niggahs hez—'n'—'n'—I hope yo' fambly's wel—o-o-ouch! Fo' de god Lawd's sake, how yo' does pinch mah han's, Marse Debbil! Ow! please lemme go, please, 'n'—'n'—"

His voice ended in a howl as the tumbler dropped from his hand and was shivered on the floor. The sepulchral voice from the armor cut him short.

"That's enough, yo' old hypoerite! So this is the way yo' look after yo' master's interests, is it?—with yo' lying and cheating and thieving behind his back! So this is the wicked snake nature that hides under yo' livery and yo' fine manners and smooth talk? I have come to put my spell on yo', and I warn yo' now that unless yo' stop right here in yo' tracks and head yo' self for the narrow path, yo' doom is sealed! Yo' tongue will wither up in yo' head, yo' feet will shake with palsy, yo' hands will change to claws, and yo' will fall like Lucifer!"

Uncle Roscoe groveled and moaned beneath the words; but the master pitilessly continued:

"And now on one condition only will I spare you—just one. And that is that you kneel down there on the floor and solemnly promise to stop yo' scandalous habits. Otherwise—" He loosed one wrist and made a motion toward the negro's breast.

The old man's jaw dropped in hideous awe.

"I—I boun' do what yo' done tol' me, Marse Debbil," he whined, "on'y spar' me, Marse Debbil, spar' me, 'n' I sw'ar t' promise—I—I—I—be'n er monst'ous bad niggah—wuthless 'n' no-count—but I boun' do what yo' done tol' me!"

Captain Chesaby loosed the other wrist, and Uncle Roscoe sank to the floor, with his knees in the broken glass and whisky, a miserable, terror-stricken, trembling heap."

"Come urged the Captain at last, less harshly that he had spoken before, for the disgrace of the trusted old servant touched him, "come, are yo' going to promise?"

The old man raised his clay-hued face, eyes rolling, lips twitching, and began: "Oh, Lawd!—I means Marse Debbil—I—I—I promise, sho'ly—'n'—'n'—" he sought desperately for words to express

his earnestness—" 'n' true dat I hain't nebber gwine tech Marse Lafe's co'n licker—'n'—'n' I gwine change roun' 'n' be a diff'nt niggah. Yes, sah! I be'n turr'ble bad en my day, thievin' 'n' lyin', but I gwine tu'n en de narrer path. I gwine ax yo' t' fergive me, Marse Debbil."

A rustle and an indignant snort attracted Captain Chesaby's attention at this juncture toward the back door, and looking in that direction he beheld Aunt Dilsey, Uncle Roscoe's rotund life-partner, filling the doorway with her august person. In one hand she firmly held her trusty broom. In her wide, glittering eye was written wonder, contempt and anger. She threateningly waved the broom to and from before her, like a tiger lashing his tail. As Uncle Roscoe stopped for breath, she uttered a cry such as a conquering Zulu might voice, and bore down upon him. He heard the yell and the hollow thump of her feet, and half rose to meet the onslaught, but it was too late. She smote at him wily and viciously. The blow caught him on the ear ad cheek, and with a squall that was part gurgle, he toppled over.

"I'll l'arn yo' manners!" she shrieked, "yo' nasty black ruff'an! I'll l'arn yo' t' break inter Marse Lafe's whisky 'n' lay heah drunk en de hall, whar de quality mought walk in, a axin' Satan t' fergib yo'!" She struck fiercely again. "Git outen heah! Git outen my sight, yo' low-life scamp, afore I kills yo'!"

The old butler scrambled, rumped and disheveled, from beneath the rain of blows, and with coat-tails streaming to the wind dashed down the hall and disappeared through the door, with never a look back at the scene of his downfall.

Aunt Dilsey stayed behind and angrily surveyed the wrecked julep, muttering meanwhile threats of bodily violence upon her wayward spouse. Then she betook herself to the kitchen and returned with a mop and dust-pan. Her anger had not yet simmered down, and she cleaned up the wreck.

"I'll cure dat triflin' houn' er dese tricks er break 'is back!" she avowed vigorously, as she waddled back to her work.

The yard still bore its lazy summer appearance, when Captain Chesaby, divested of his suit of mail, viewed it again from the rear porch.

A few chickens sang their songs of contentment from a bunch of shubbery near-by. An idle horse, under some trees in the paddock, stamped his feet and struck with his tail at the impudent flies that persisted in biting him. A locust skirled dissonantly. But these were the only indications of life present. No sound arose from the negro quarters.

So the Captain stole away through the orchard and was soon lost in its maze of green.

The sun was slowly sinking in a peaceful sky, when, with a fair string of fish, Captain Chesaby neared his home that evening. Whistling merrily an old war tune and spoke a cheery word to the field-hands he passed coming to supper, and he steered his course so that he would pass Uncle Roscoe's cabin.

As he drew near he saw the old man seated on the door-step of his abode, wrists bandaged with clean strips of linen, his face wearing a painfully subdued expression. He seemed to study a Bible which lay before him on his knees.

Captain Chesaby stopped whistling and rested his pole gently against the cabin, he looked at Uncle Roscoe for a minute; but the old man avoided his gaze.

"Well Roscoe," he drawled at length, "what yo' been doing to yo' self now? fighting?"

But just then the strains of a plantation song broke in upon them and Uncle Roscoe gave a perceptible shiver and glanced uneasily about as the voice of Aunt Dilsey floated sweetly out through the kitchen window of the big house:

Some folks say dat a deacon won' steal—
Way down yander en de co'n-fiel'!
But I cotch two en my co'n-fiel'—
Way down yander en de co'n-fiel'!

"Angel, Gabr'el!" the old man ejaculated involuntarily. Then pulling himself together with an effort he looked up and met the Captain's gaze.

"No, suh, Marse Lafe," he said, "I hain't b'en en no rumpus: Des got mah han's cotch en de well-chain." He shivered again slightly and glanced apprehensively over his shoulder toward Chesaby Hall. "But I boun' I hain't never gwine to git 'em cotch ag'in, marse Lafe," he added.

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