

Shack.

By FRANK H. SWEET.

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TWO black, eager faces bent suddenly forward as the dice-bones, they called them—rattled upon the low roof of Wung Sin's laundry. As the tiny cubes tumbled over and over, deciding the ownership of the two coins which lay between the youthful gamblers, the "shooter" cried fervently:

"Come seben! Dis fo' a pail o' shoes!"

To which the other, to counteract the spell of the conjure invoked, responded with equal fervor:

"Call him off, seben! Dat my break fas!" at the same time reaching hopefully toward the coins.

But the shooter forestalled him—for the dice had now stopped—and declared the money his.

He picked up the coins and ostentatiously tossed one back upon the roof calling:

"Fade me, Cuffy!"

Cuffy faded him by searching long and laboriously through his clothing for another coin, which he at length found and placed beside the one on the roof. Then the shooter picked up the dice and juggled them in the hollow of his hands, blowing upon his fingers for luck. When they rattled back to the roof the two faces again bent lower, one fearfully, the other exultantly and jeering.


"Yo's, Shack." And the one called Cuffy rose to his feet with ashy face. "It's b'liege to stop now, nigger. I's done out."

Shack looked at him curiously, standing on the defensive. Indeed, there was usually good reason for Shack's customary defensive attitude at the end of a game of craps. He had been accused of ringing in "peeties"—loaded dice—of overawing a weak opponent by a blustering demeanor, of doing many things that were considered disgraceful among roustabouts. But, however lawless he might be or mean, he never showed any signs of it outwardly. His eyes had a keen, straightforward way of searching other eyes, his shoulders remained square, his head was carried high.

As he stood there on the defensive, waiting for Cuffy to pitch into him as other worsted crap shooters had done, he first wondered, then grew derisive at the larger boy's peaceable, almost pitiable attitude.

"Skeered?" he mocked.

"No, I ain't skeered," answered Cuffy quickly, "but what for I fight yo'?"



"COME SEBEN! DIS FO' A PAIR O' SHOES!"

Dar ain' nobody to blame but me. I—I done stole dat money, an' I promise mammy I nebber shoot craps in all de world. I ain' no—good any mo'," his lips beginning to quiver.

Shack grinned.

"Yo' ain' de firs' pusson dat stole," he jeered. "I reckon yo' better go off in de dark an' hide. Den de p'lice ain' cotch yo'. Now lemme see yo' cry."

Cuffy paid no attention to him.

"An' my mammy trusted me," he went on dolefully, "an' was a-savin' up for me to go to Tuskegee an' learn a heap o' t'ings, an' den I was a-goin' to make money an' buy her a house wid a plazer like w'ite fo'ks an' a mule an' cow an' some chickens, an' now—oh, mammy!"

"Dat's right," cried Shack encouragingly. "I see dem tears a-comin' Cuffy. Let 'em drap, nigger; let 'em drap!"

A momentary flash dried the incipient tears, and Cuffy's muscles grew tense. Then again the shoulders drooped.

"I ain't min', Shack," he said, without resentment. "I could whup yo' like I has done, but I 'low yo' better whup me. I'll stan' still an' let yo' poun' till yo' arm's tired. Yo' ain' un-terstan'. My mammy's a-scrapin' an' savin' for school, an' I'm a-scrapin' an' savin' too. We ain' spen' one cent widout need. An' now I done los' a whole dollar shootin' craps—an' I earn dis week—an' I promise mammy I neb-

ber shot craps in de world. I wish yo' d whup me good, Shack."

But Shack was not fighting on that line. He threw his arms skilfully and regarded Cuffy with critical amusement.

"So yo's a mammy boy," he sneered "an' a schoolin' boy! Wha's yo' sense, Cuffy? A mammy's good 'nough fo' babies, but we's too big. I nebber had no mammy, an' I'm tough. Yo' better widout one. Dey spiles big boys."

"Yo' ain't know my mammy," was Cuffy's answer, "an' yo' ain't keer fo' schoolin'. Cep'n' for dat yo'd be t'inkin' 'n' like me." Then a sudden inspiration seized him, and he added, "Wha' yo' stay tonight, Shack?"

"Don' know," indifferently. "roun' some'er's. Mebbe in ole Brown's lumber yard if de watchman don' ketch me."

"Den s'pose yo' come on home 'long o' me an' see my mammy," invited Cuffy eagerly. "She make yo' t'ink like me, shore. We hab watermilyun an' sweet taters an' bacon, an' in de maw'n' in' mammy likely gib us fried chicken. Yo' can sleep 'long o' me in my bed. Wha' yo' say?"

Shack did not say anything for fully two minutes. The question was a weighty one. At first his impulse was a flat refusal, but the thought of meeting Cuffy's mammy and being able to ridicule that obstinate boy in the intricacies of his own home was a pleasant one. And then the "watermilyun an' sweet taters" and the possibility of fried chicken! They decided him.

"It's yo' cake," he grinned.

The two boys walked cautiously to the edge of Wung Sin's laundry roof and peered down. Crap shooting was a serious offense, and Shack was careful to keep this retreat on the laundry roof from the knowledge of the police.

"See any'ing, Cuffy?" he whispered as they glanced sharply from side to side.

"Only dat fruit seller on de corner. He ain' min'."

Grasping the edge of the roof with their hands, they swung over and dropped lightly to the ground. Then they scurried round the corner into Bay street and were lost in the crowd.

Cuffy's mother lived in a small tenement in the colored district. She was ironing when the boys arrived.

"Dat yo', Cuffy?" she called as they darkened the low doorway. "Come right in, honey. An' who's yo' friend?"

"Him Shack, mammy," answered Cuffy rather proudly. "Yo' done heah me tole 'bout him."

"Co'se I has, honey. co'se I has," the woman exclaimed, leaving her ironing and coming forward cordially. "Glad to see yo', Shack. Come right in, boy. I done heah 'bout yo' heaps o' times. Sit down in dat rockin' cheer. Dar, dat's right. So yo's Shack. Law, law! My boy's done tole 'bout yo' no end. Say yo's able do any'ing yo' set out for; dat yo's de moe' promisn' black boy in de whole city." She returned to her ironing and worked vigorously for several minutes, then: "Does yo' know, honey, dat's a mighty fine say-so? De moe' promisn' boy! Dat means dar's gran' wuk befo' yo'—gran' wuk, honey. We black fo'ks need jes' sech boys to grow up an' lead us. I's glad yo' an' Cuffy am' frien's. He's a good boy, but easy led. He needs strong, true frien's to show de way. Wha's dat, Cuffy? Shack goin' stay all night? Shore 'nough? Law, law! Dat's good! Now yo' boys jes' placate 'mong yo'se'fs while I get dis ironin' off; den we's hab supper an' mo' talk. Cuffy, yo' put dat milyun in a pail o' col' water."

Shack had listened without any attempt to answer, but his eyes and ears were keenly alert. This was an experience which was entirely new and which it would take him time to adjust. He had peered into rooms before now and had generally been driven away with a broom or pokers, but he did not remember any of them that had been quite so clean and cozy as this scantily furnished room, and certainly none of the women had been like this one who was actually treating him as though his presence was desirable. But of course he was right in his declaration that a mammy was a detriment to a big boy. This was only an unusual side he was seeing; presently would appear some weakness with which he could overwhelm Cuffy.

But what appeared presently brought him half to his feet in sudden wonder, derision, contempt. There was Cuffy actually telling his mammy about the crap shooting and the money he had lost, and more wonderful yet, instead of scolding and punishing him as ordinary women would have done, this mammy was patting her boy's cheeks and talking in a low, earnest voice, and, yes, they were both crying.

Shack drew a hard, deep breath and waited in momentary expectation of hearing his own name. But, no, Cuffy only spoke of himself and then went back to his chair by the window, where he sat very sober and thoughtful. And his mammy began to put away her ironing and prepare for supper.

After supper Shack returned to the rocking chair, feeling very comfortable and contented. And the puzzling mammy, after she had cleared the table and washed the dishes, came and sat down between him and Cuffy.

"Co'se yo' goin' to Tuskegee when yo' get able, honey," she began, and then accepting this for a fact and much servant of the indignant scorn on his face, she went on in an almost reverent voice: "Hit's a gran' t'ing, de school; a gran', noble t'ing. Wha' yo' black fo'ks lak is knowin' t'ings. de school will gib us dat, headin' an' runnin' ober. Yo' boys dat roun' fo' schoolin' can be mas' any'ing. de im for—preachers, doctors, lawyers, railroaders—jes' lak w'ite fo'ks. Hit-

er wid all dese t'ings ahead." Her hand sought Shack's shoulder and rested there caressingly. "Some day, honey," she continued gently, "yo'll likely be ridin' in yo' own kerridge an' be'pin' all de black fo'ks round yo'. I hope yo'll sort o' look out for Cuffy."

He's a good boy, but jes' a little weak sometimes. When yo'se bofe at Tuskegee don' let him shoot craps an' t'ings like dat. He'll heah to yo', Promis' yo'll keer for him, honey."

Again Shack's breath came hard, but her hand was upon his shoulder, her eyes looking into his. He tried to scoff and jeer, but the words stuck in his throat, and only a husky "Yes'm, I will," came to his lips. Then he rose suddenly to his feet, only to slink back into the chair, hot and trembling, for this strange mammy had kissed him.

"I knowed yo' would, honey," she said softly, "but I wanted to heah yo' promise. A boy lak yo' nebber forgets his promise."

Shack made a desperate effort to break from the spell that was closing in upon him. Missionaries he did not mind, but this mammy was approaching him in an unrecognized way. If he wished to humiliate Cuffy he must keep better control of himself. But he only said:

"School like dat coo's a heap."

"No, honey; hit's made for pore fo'ks like we all. Me an' Cuffy 'low on gettin' a hun'ered dollars, den I'll be sen' in' what I can to him. I reckon yo' could save dat much quicker'n we hab. Cuffy says yo' make heaps o' money."

For want of a better answer Shack nodded. He thought of the \$7 or \$8 he



"WHO'S A NIGGER?" HE DEMANDED.

often made in a single week by shooting craps. But her next words chilled him:

"It's glad yo' ain't shoot craps, honey."

"How yo' know?" he demanded sharply.

"By yo' eyes an' de way yo' walks," she answered, smiling. "Fo'ks ain' shoot craps an' do mean t'ings when dey walk an' look like yo'. I know, Dat's why I make yo' promise to keer for Cuffy. Law, law! Shakin' yo' head ain' fool me. Crap shootin' a mean, low t'ing, an' I's mighty glad yo' ain' do hit."

Shack's eyes fell gradually to the floor. In imagination he could see Cuffy over by the window regarding him curiously and these other eyes looking at him with frank confidence. He tried to raise his gaze to theirs, but could not. What did it mean? He had never felt timid or abashed before.

When he went into the loft with Cuffy he was thinking very hard and very shrewdly. He had never been in a real bed before, and the softness felt deliciously soothing, but for all that he did not fall asleep. He listened to Cuffy's regular breathing and thought and struggled and understood rebelliously that he was being conquered, but he was straightforward and sharp with himself, even though it hurt. And at length he heard this strange, tender voiced mammy beginning to move below.

When he went down he accompanied Cuffy to a corner behind a large storehouse to gather kindlings. There he made a last desperate effort to assert himself.

Placing a chip upon his shoulder, he turned fiercely to his companion.

"Who's a nigger?" he demanded.

Cuffy laughed in his face.

"I reckon we bofe is," he grinned. "But wha' for yo' act so, Shack? I ain' goin' knock no chip offen yo' shoulder. We ain' no need fight. We's goin' to Tuskegee, me an' yo' is. Yo' done tole mammy so."

"I done tole yo' is skeered to fight," yelled Shack. "Didn't yo' say I's nigger when I crap yo' out jes'day? Now knock dis chip off an' prove hit."

"Mebbe I call yo' nigger," retorted Cuffy placidly. "I know yo' did me plenty time. Dat ain' nuffin. I ain' goin' fight, an' yo' ain' goin' fight. We's got better sense. But dar's mammy callin' us to breakfas'. Come, Shack!"

The chip fell unheeded from Shack's shoulder. But he was not a boy to do things by halves. As they went toward the house he slipped the dollar he had won into Cuffy's pocket.

"Tell yo' mammy yo' met de crap shooter an' he gib hit back," he said. "An' if she eber ax yo' does I shoot craps, yo' say no, I done gib hit up, an' I has. I's goin' take dat job de steamboat man offer at fo' dollar. T'ain' much, but mebbe I make more by wukin' hard. I's goin' 'long o' yo' to Tuskegee, sure 'nough."

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