

O. Henry Stories

I.—The Guardian of the Accolade

By O. HENRY

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NOT the least important of the force of the Weymouth bank was Uncle Bushrod. Sixty years had Uncle Bushrod given of faithful service to the house of Weymouth as chattel, servant and friend. Of the color of the mahogany bank furniture was Uncle Bushrod—thus dark was he externally; white as the unlinked pages of the bank ledgers was his soul. Eminent among the bankers of the town, Uncle Bushrod would have been, for to him the only institution in existence worth considering was the Weymouth bank, of which he was something between porter and generalissimo in charge.

Weymouth lay, dreamy and unbragous, among the low foothills along the brow of a southern valley. Three banks there were in Weymouthville. Two were hopeless, misguided enterprises, lacking the presence and prestige of a Weymouth to give them glory. The third was the bank, managed by the Weymouths—and Uncle Bushrod.

In the old Weymouth homestead—the red brick, white porticoed mansion, the first to your right as you crossed Elder creek coming into town—lived Mr. Robert Weymouth, the president of the bank; his widowed daughter, Mrs. Vesey, called "Miss Letty" by every one, and her two children, Nan and Guy. There also, in a cottage on the grounds, resided Uncle Bushrod and Aunt Mallindy, his wife. Mr. William Weymouth, the cashier of the bank, lived in a modern, fine house on the principal avenue.

Mr. Robert was a large, stout man, sixty-two years of age, with a smooth, plump face, long iron gray hair and fiery blue eyes. He was high tempered, kind and generous, with a youthful smile and a formidable, stern voice that did not always mean what it sounded like. Mr. William was a milder man, correct in deportment and absorbed in business. The Weymouths formed the family of Weymouthville and were looked up to, as was their right of heritage.

Uncle Bushrod was the bank's trusted porter, messenger, vassal and guardian. He carried a key to the vault, just as Mr. Robert and Mr. William did. Sometimes there was ten, fifteen or twenty thousand dollars in sacked silver stacked on the vault floor. It was safe with Uncle Bushrod. He was a Weymouth in heart, honesty and pride.

Of late Uncle Bushrod had not been without worry. It was on account of Marse Robert. For nearly a year Mr. Robert had been known to indulge in too much drink. Not enough, understand, to become tipsy, but the habit was getting a hold upon him, and every one was beginning to notice it. Half a dozen times a day he would leave the bank and step around to the Merchants and Planters' hotel to take a drink. Mr. Robert's unusual keen judgment and business capacity became a little impaired. Mr. William, a Weymouth, but not so rich in experience, tried to dam the inevitable back flow of the tide, but with incomplete success. The deposits in the Weymouth bank dropped from six figures to five. Past due paper began to accumulate, owing to injudicious loans. No one cared to address Mr. Robert on the subject of temperance. Many of his friends said that the cause of it had been the death of his wife some two years before. Others hesitated on account of Mr. Robert's quick temper, which was extremely apt to resent personal interference of such a nature. Miss Letty and the children noticed the change and grieved about it. Uncle Bushrod also worried, but he was one of those who would not have dared to remonstrate, though he and Marse Robert had been raised almost as companions. But there was a heavier shock coming to Uncle Bushrod than that caused by the bank president's toddies and juleps.

Mr. Robert had a passion for fishing, which he usually indulged whenever the season and business permitted. One day, when reports had been coming in relating to the bass and perch, he announced his intention of making a two or three days' visit to the lakes. He was going down, he said, to Reedy lake with Judge Archinard, an old friend.

Now, Uncle Bushrod was treasurer of the Sons and Daughters of the Burning Bush. Every association he belonged to made him treasurer without hesitation. He stood A-1 in colored circles. He was understood among them to be Mr. Bushrod Weymouth of the Weymouth bank.

The night following the day on which Mr. Robert mentioned his intended fishing trip the old man woke up and rose from his bed at 12 o'clock, declaring he must go down to the bank and fetch the passbook of the Sons and Daughters, which he had forgotten to bring home. The bookkeeper had balanced it for him that day, put the can-

celed checks in it and snapped two elastic bands around it. He put but one hand around other passbooks.

Aunt Mallindy objected to the mission at so late an hour, denouncing it as foolish and unnecessary, but Uncle Bushrod was not to be deflected from duty.

"I done told Sister Adaline Hoskins," he said, "to come by here for dat book tomorrow mornin' at sebin o'clock for to kyar' it to de meetin' of de bo'd of 'rangements, and dat book gwine to be here when she come."

So Uncle Bushrod put on his old brown suit, got his thick hickory stick and meandered through the almost deserted streets of Weymouthville. He entered the bank, unlocked the side door, and found the passbook where he had left it, in the little back room used for private consultations, where he always hung his coat. Looking about casually he saw that everything was as he had left it, and was about to start for home when he was brought to a standstill by the sudden rattle of a key in the front door. Some one came quickly in, closed the door softly and entered the counting room through the door in the iron railing.

That division of the bank's space was connected with the back room by a narrow passageway, now in deep darkness.

Uncle Bushrod, firmly gripping his hickory stick, tiptoed gently up this passage until he could see the midnight intruder into the sacred precincts of the Weymouth bank. One dim gas jet burned there, but even in its nebulous light he perceived at once that the prowler was the bank's president.

Wondering, fearful, undecided what to do, the old colored man stood motionless in the gloomy strip of hallway and waited developments.

The vault, with its big iron door, was opposite him. Inside that was the safe, holding the papers of value, the gold and currency of the bank. On the floor of the vault was, perhaps, \$18,000 in silver.

The president took his key from his pocket, opened the vault and went inside, nearly closing the door behind him. Uncle Bushrod saw through the narrow aperture the flicker of a candle. In a minute or two it seemed an hour to the watcher—Mr. Robert came out, bringing with him a large hand satchel, handling it in a careful but hurried manner, as if fearful that he might be observed. With one hand he closed and locked the vault door.

With a reluctant theory forming itself beneath his wool Uncle Bushrod waited and watched, shaking in his concealing shadow.

Mr. Robert set the satchel softly upon a desk and turned his coat collar up about his neck and ears. He was

pressed in a rough suit of gray as if for traveling. He glanced with frowning intentness at the big office clock above the burning gas jet and then looked lingeringly about the bank—lingeringly and fondly. Uncle Bushrod thought, as one who bids farewell to dear and familiar scenes.

Now he caught up his burden again and moved promptly and softly out of the bank by the way he had come, locking the front door behind him.

For a minute or longer Uncle Bushrod was as stone in his tracks. Had that midnight ringer of safes and vaults been any other on earth than the man he was the old retainer would have rushed upon him and struck to save the Weymouth property. But now the watcher's soul was tortured by the poignant dread of something worse than mere robbery. He was seized by an accusing terror that said the Weymouth name and the Weymouth honor were about to be lost. Marse Robert robbing the bank! What else could it mean? The hour of the night, the stealthy visit to the vault, the satchel brought forth full and with expedition and silence, the prowler's rough dress, his solicitous reading of the clock and noiseless departure—what else could it mean?

And then to the turmoil of Uncle Bushrod's thoughts came the corroborating recollection of preceding events—Mr. Robert's increasing intemperance and consequent many moods of royal high spirits and stern tempers; the casual talk he had heard in the bank of the decrease in business and difficulty in collecting loans. What else could it all mean but that Robert Weymouth was an absconder—was about to fly with the bank's remaining funds, leaving Mr. William, Miss Letty, little Nan, Guy and Uncle Bushrod to bear the disgrace?

During one minute Uncle Bushrod considered these things, and then he awoke to sudden determination and action.

"Lawd, Lawd!" he moaned aloud as he hobbled hastily toward the side door. "Sech a comeoff after all dese here years of big doin's and fine doin's. Sean'ous sights upon de yearth when de Weymouth fambly done turn out robbers and 'bezzlers! Time for Uncle Bushrod to clean out somebody's chicken coop and eben matters up. Oh, Lawd! Marse Robert, you ain't gwine do dat. 'N Miss Letty an' dem chillun so proud and talkin' 'Weymouth, Weymouth,' all de time! I'm gwine to stop you if I can. 'Spec you shoot Mr. Nigger's head off ef he fool wid you, but I'm gwine stop you ef I can."

Uncle Bushrod, aided by his hickory stick, impeded by his rheumatism, hurried down the street toward the railroad station, where the two lines touching Weymouthville met. As he had expected and feared, he saw there Mr. Robert standing in the shadow of the building waiting for the train. He held the satchel in his hand.

When Uncle Bushrod came within twenty yards of the bank president, standing like a huge, gray ghost by the station wall, sudden perturbation seized him. The rashness and audacity of the thing he had come to do struck him fully. He would have been happy could he have turned and fled from the possibilities of the famous Weymouth wrath. But again he saw, in his fancy, the white, reproachful face of Miss Letty and the distressed looks of Nan and Guy should he fail in his duty and they question him as to his stewardship.

Braced by the thought, he approached in a straight line, clearing his throat and pounding with his stick so that he might be early recognized. Thus he might avoid the likely danger of too suddenly surprising the sometimes hasty Mr. Robert.

"Is that you, Bushrod?" called the clamant, clear voice of the gray ghost. "Yes, sub, Marse Robert."

"What the devil are you doing out at this time of night?"

For the first time in his life Uncle Bushrod told Marse Robert a false hood. He could not repress it. He would have to circumlocute a little. His nerve was not equal to a direct attack.

"I done been down, sub, to see ole Aunt M'ria Patterson. She taken sick in de night, and I kyar'd her a bottle of M'bindy's medecine. Yes, sub."

"Humph!" said Robert. "You better get home out of de night air. It's damp. You'll hardly be worth killing tomorrow on account of your rheumatism. Think it'll be a clear day, Bushrod?"

"I low it will, sub. De sun sot red las' night."

Mr. Robert lit a cigar in the shadow, and the smoke looked like his gray ghost expanding and escaping into the night air. Somehow Uncle Bushrod could barely force his reluctant tongue to the dreadful subject. He stood, awkward, shambling, with his feet upon the gravel and fumbling with his stick. But then, afar off—three miles away, at the Jintown switch—he heard the faint whistle of the coming train, the one that was to transport the Weymouth name into the regions of dishonor and shame. All fear left him. He took off his hat and faced the chief of the clan he served, the great, royal, kind, lofty, terrible Weymouth. He bearded him there at the brink of the awful thing that was about to happen.

"Marse Robert," he began, his voice quavering a little with the stress of his feelings, "you 'member de day dey rode de tunament at Oak Lawn—de day, sub, dat you win in de ridin' and you crown Miss Lucy de queen?"

"Tournament?" said Mr. Robert, taking his cigar from his mouth. "Yes, I remember very well the—but what the deuce are you talking about tonight ments here at midnight for? Go 'long home, Bushrod. I believe you're sleep walkin'."

"Miss Lucy tetch you on de about-

der," continued the old man, never heeding, "wid a word and say: 'I mek you a knight, Sub Robert. Rise up, pure and fearless and widout reproach.' Dat what Miss Lucy say. Dat's been a long time ago, but me nor you ain't forgot it. And den dar's another time we ain't forgot—de time when Miss Lucy lay on her las' bed. She sent for Uncle Bushrod, and she say: 'Uncle Bushrod, when I die I want you to take good care of Mr. Robert. Seem like—so Miss Lucy say—he listen to you mo' dan to anybody else. He apt to be mighty fractious sometimes, and maybe he cuss you when you try to suade him, but he need somebody wid understand him to be round wid him. He am like a little child sometimes—so Miss Lucy say, wid her eyes shinin' in her po', thin face—but he always been—dem was her words—my knight, pure and fearless and widout reproach.'"

Mr. Robert began to mask, as was his habit, a tendency to softheartedness with a spurious anger.

"You—you old windbag!" he growled through a cloud of swirling cigar smoke. "I believe you are crazy. I told you to go home, Bushrod. Miss Lucy said that, did she? Well, we haven't kept the escutcheon very clear. Two years ago last week, wasn't it, Bushrod, when she died? Confound it! Are you going to stand there all night gabbling like a coffee colored gander?"

The train whistled again. Now it was at the water tank, a mile away.

"Marse Robert," said Uncle Bushrod, laying his hand on the satchel that the banker held, "for Gawd's sake don't take dis wid you. I knows what's in it. I knows where you got it in de bank. Don't kyar' it wid you. Dey's big trouble in dat valise for Miss Lucy and Miss Lucy's chillun. Hit's bound to destroy de name of Weymouth and bow down dem dat own it wid shame and tribulation. Marse Robert, you can kill dis ole nigger of er will, but I don't take away dis 'er valise. If I ever crosses over de Jordan what I gwine to say to Miss Lucy when she ax me, 'Uncle Bushrod, wharfo' didn't you take good care of Mr. Robert?'"

Robert Weymouth threw away his cigar and shook free the arm with that peculiar gesture that always preceded his outbursts of irascibility. Uncle Bushrod bowed his head to the expected storm, but he did not flinch. If the house of Weymouth was to fall he would fall with it. The banker spoke, and Uncle Bushrod blinked with surprise. The storm was there, but it was suppressed to the quietness of a summer breeze.

"Bushrod," said Mr. Robert in a lower voice than he usually employed, "you have overstepped all bounds. You have presumed upon the leniency with which you have been treated to meddle unpardonably. So you know what is in this satchel? Your long and faithful service is some excuse, but—go home. Bushrod—not another word!"

But Bushrod grasped the satchel with a firmer hand. The headlight of the train was now lightening the shadows about the station. The roar was increasing, and folks were stirring about at the track side.

"Marse Robert, gimme dis 'er valise. I got a right, sub, to talk to you dis 'er way. I slaved for you and 'tended to you from a child up. I went 'throug de war yo' body servant tell we whipped de Yankee and sent 'em back to de no'th. I was at yo' weddin', and I was n' fur away when yo' Miss Letty was bawn. And Miss Letty's chillun,

Salting Herring. Centuries ago William Buckels, a Hollander of Bierwich, made the then astonishing discovery that salt would preserve fish and that salted fish could be packed and exported. Before his time herrings had to be consumed within a few days of their capture. Buckels salted them. In 1386 William Buckels sailed the first hundred of herrings, and, having salted them, he packed them in barrels. This exercise of common sense resulted in a singular development of the resources of the country. The English fisheries were not as prominent 500 years ago as they are now, and Holland had for a time almost a monopoly of a market which she was able to create and to supply. Buckels had not to wait 500 years to have his claim to public gratitude recognized. Charles V. had a statue erected to the mackerel salter who became the benefactor of his country. Queen Mary of Hungary, however, paid him even greater honor. During her residence in Holland she discovered his tomb and, seated upon it, ate a salted herring.

Smelting in Bulacan. A primitive iron smelting industry, evidently of Chinese origin, exists in Bulacan, a province of the island of Luzon. Magnetite and hematite ores, found in the locality, are smelted by the natives in small bamboo cased blast furnaces of soft clay bricks set in clay, each furnace being seven and one-half feet high and five feet in external diameter, with a conical inner cavity, tapering from forty to twenty inches. The furnace has a single clay tuyere and a Chinese double acting hand blower made from a hollow tree trunk and fitted with a feather packed wooden piston. An average charge is fifty-five pounds of ore and ninety-five of charcoal, no flux being used. The iron made is cast directly into molds for plowshares and plow points, and the product of a furnace is about 500 pounds of castings daily.

The Chief's Error. Goron was chief of the Paris police when the following incident took place: Lombroso had written a book in 1888 on criminality among women, so runs the story, and when it was finished wrote to Goron to send him "forthwith" some portraits of Parisian women criminals. Anxious to please the writer, the package was made up and started on its tour to Italy. When the book came out Lombroso sent a copy, handsomely bound, to Goron, who saw his gift acknowledged on the first page. "It was a scholarly book," said the chief, "and would have had a large sale but for an error on my part. The pictures came out of the wrong drawer of my desk. They were not criminals at all, but women who had applied for hucksters' licenses, and a new edition had to be printed to make good a police mistake."

dey watches today for Uncle Bushrod when he come home ever' evenin'. I been a Weymouth, all 'cept in color and entitlements. Both of us is old, Marse Robert. 'Tain't goin' to be long tell we gwine to see Miss Lucy and has to give an account of our doin's. De ole nigger man won't be 'spected to say much mo' dan he done all he could by de fambly dat owned him. But de Weymouths, dey must say dey been livin' pure and fearless and widout reproach. Gimme dis valise, Marse Robert—I'm gwine to hab it. I'm gwine to take it back to the bank and lock it up in de vault. I'm gwine to do Miss Lucy's biddin'. Turn 'er loose, Marse Robert."

The train was standing at the station. Some men were pushing trucks along the side. Two or three sleepy passengers got off and wandered away into the night. The conductor stepped to the gravel, swung his lantern and called: "Hello, Frank!" at some one

invisible. The bell clanged, the brakes hissed, the conductor drawled: "All aboard!"

Mr. Robert released his hold on the satchel. Uncle Bushrod hugged it to his breast with both arms, as a lover clasps his first beloved.

"Take it back with you, Bushrod," said Mr. Robert, thrusting his hands into his pockets. "And let the subject drop—now mind! You've said quite enough. I'm going to take this train. Tell Mr. William I will be back on Saturday. Good night."

The banker climbed the steps of the moving train and disappeared in a coach. Uncle Bushrod stood motionless, still embracing the precious satchel. His eyes were closed and his lips were moving in thanks to the Master above for the salvation of the Weymouth honor. He knew Mr. Robert would return when he said he would. The Weymouths never lied. Nor now, thank the Lord, could it be said that they embezzled the money in banks.

Then awoke to the necessity for further guardianship of Weymouth trust funds, the old man started for the bank with the redeemed satchel.

Three hours from Weymouthville, in the gray dawn, Mr. Robert alighted from the train at a lonely flag station. Dimly he could see the figure of a man waiting on the platform, and the shape of a spring wagon, team and driver. Half a dozen lengthy bamboo fishing poles projected from the wagon's rear.

"You're here, Bob," said Judge Archinard, Mr. Robert's old friend and schoolmate. "It's going to be a royal day for fishing. I thought you said—why, didn't you bring along the stuff?"

The president of the Weymouth bank took off his hat and rumbled his gray locks.

"Well, Ben, to tell you the truth, there's an infernally presumptuous old nigger belonging in my family that broke up the arrangement. He came down to the depot and vetoed the whole proceeding. He means all right, and—well, I reckon he is right. Somehow he had found out what I had along, though I hid it in the bank vault and sneaked it out at midnight. I reckon he has noticed that I've been indulging a little more than a gentleman should, and he laid for me with some reaching arguments."

"I'm going to quit drinking," Mr. Robert concluded. "I've come to the conclusion that a man can't keep it up and be quite what he'd like to be—pure and fearless and widout reproach—that's the way old Bushrod quoted it."

"Well, I'll have to admit," said the judge thoughtfully as they climbed into the wagon, "that the old darkey's argument can't conscientiously be overruled."

"Still," said Mr. Robert, with a ghost of a sigh, "there was two quarts of the finest old silk velvet Bourbon in that satchel you ever wet your lips with."

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