

THE UNDOING OF A DOUBT

BY HUGO ST. FINSTERRE, M.D.
AUTHOR OF "WHO'S WHO IN LITERATURE"

Continued from first page.

His mistress held the same belief when she left her home and raised the window of my prison and helped me to escape. Even if Erastus had the misfortune with him I could not open it, for it was intended for another person.

My interest centered upon the basket at his feet.

"What have you in that?" I asked.

"That I like to forget 'bout it. Dat's full ob wittles dat Miss Esther told me to giv to yo'. She put 'em up fur yo' here'f and told me to keep huntin fur yo' till I found yo', as she reckoned yo' must be powerful hungry. Hah yo' got any appetite left, Marso Hank?"

"Have I any appetite left?" I repeated, almost dazed by the glorious tidings. "Ah, but let me test the question!"

Erastus handed me the basket, and, removing the snowy napkin inclosing the peas, the corn cake and the game and gazed enraptured upon the contents.

There are some scenes too sacred to be dwelt upon and to which the pen cannot do justice. Let it suffice to say that when I passed the basket back to the servant he remarked, with a grin:

"Yo' hain't left a crumb, Marso Hank. Shall I go and get a cartload more fur yo'?"

"I have plenty, thank you," I replied dignifiedly. "But you must remember that that is the first mouthful I have had since last night."

His eyes expanded, and he twisted his thick lips into form to emit a whistle.

"Gorryation, if dat had been me I'd died two, free days ago!"

I looked toward Black Man's swamp. Still it gave no sign of life.

"Well, Erastus, now that the hungry has been fed, what do you think I ought next to do?"

"Hanged if I know! Miss Esther writ it all down in dat letter and said as how dat would explain matters."

And the worried fellow renewed his search for the missing missive, making it so thorough that he removed each shoe and shook it out, but the former hunt had established the fact that it was nowhere about him.

I felt uneasy in remaining near the swamp, from which my pursuers were likely to emerge at any moment.

"Erastus, I am going home with you."

Lead on, "I guess dat's what Miss Esther expects from de way she looked at me when she handed me dat letter."

"Don't think any more about it," I remarked, with an odd pang of jealousy that so unworthy a person should be the recipient of a missive from the dainty hand of Colonel Mansley's only daughter.

"Beats de debil!" muttered Erastus, finally giving up the hunt through his clothing and scrutinizing the ground as he walked onward, with me beside him, furtively glancing every few seconds over my shoulder.

"Do you know a darky named Pete who lives in Black Man's swamp?" I asked, with a view of diverting his attention from the subject that distressed him.

Erastus stopped short, with a sort of gasp, and stared at me.

"Why do yo' ask dat question, Marso Hank? Yo' knows dat everybody in de world knows dat wuthless nigger. He's a bad man. Deast yo' trust him."

"I must say I don't fancy his looks and manner and might have known that you are acquainted with him. Why does he make his home in the swamp?"

My companion must have thought I was pretending ignorance, but all the same he answered with engaging frankness:

"His fader was Big Tom, who runned away af' de wah. He war de slave ob Gin'ral Witherspoon and one day killed his oberseer. He tuk to de woods, slewed de dogs dey hunted him wid and libed dar till he died."

"His wife accompanied him, I suppose?"

"Yaas, and dar son Pete was born dar and hab libed dar eber since."

"What is there so bad about Pete?"

"Why, I hab heard it said," replied Erastus, lowering his voice to a confidential key, "dat he ain't none too good to stole chickens. What yo' tink ob dat, Marso Hank?"

"It is awful," I replied, with a shudder. "I have my suspicions that he is degraded enough to indulge in such wicked doings."

"I don't say so myself, fur I nebbber hab met him when—dat is—"

"You have never met him when?"

"When—dat is, when I sometimes takes a walk by moonlight," explained Erastus, with considerable embarrassment.

This was amusing in its way, but I was eager to question the servant about the family of Colonel Mansley and saw no way of doing so. Evidently he had not a grain of doubt that I was the real Henry Beyer, who, as the accepted suitor of Miss Mansley, could impart information to others. The questions which I

He eagerly handed it to me, would have asked, therefore, would have made me ridiculous in his eyes. His mistress, having reason to believe I was in hiding somewhere in the neighborhood and knowing my personal danger, had sent her servant with food and a letter which, unfortunately, he had lost on the way.

There were other points, however, upon which it was safe to question the African.

"Erastus, what made you leave me so suddenly last night?"

"Yo' knows, Marso Hank. It war de cry ob dat bloodhound."

"But he was looking for me, not for you."

"I know dat, but I war vid yo'. Dem critters sometimes get t'ings mixed, and he might tuk me fur yo', so I not found it out till he hab chased me up."

"Have you seen anything of the dogs and men today?"

"Seed a party go by de house, but dey didn't stop. Dey had a dog wid 'em. Miss Esther seed 'em, too, and she turned white as dat. Den she writ dat letter and put up de stuff to eat and told me to try to hunt yo' up. Gorryation,

I didn't know what to look fur yo', but I jes' dog ahead till I happened to see yo', and den I nearly swung my arm off tryin to hurry yo' up."

"Has Colonel Mansley said anything in your hearing about me and the affair of last night?"

The face of the African became grave, and he lowered his voice.

"Dat's somethin goin on atween him and Miss Esther dat gits me. Dey had a long talk togeder dis mawnin, and den he had me saddle de big bay horse, and he jumped on his back and rode away like de debil."

"Where was he going?"

"Hahn! no idee, but he looked as if he mount to ride de bay to deef, and he'll doot, too, if he don't draw rein on him party soon."

We were approaching the residence of the gentleman of whom we were speaking. It was a disappointment to learn that he was absent, for it interfered with my plan of appealing directly to him. However, I could not think he would be gone long.

I was on the point of asking a question of no special import when Erastus uttered an exclamation, and I turned toward him to learn the cause. He had caught sight of an object in the path ahead and broke into a run for it. I saw something white lying on the ground and knew what it was before he added joyously:

"Dat's de letter dat Miss Esther writ fur yo' dat I lost!"

And, picking it up, he eagerly handed it to me.

"I don't s'pose it don't make no difference, Marso Hank, and, if it's all de same to yo', yo' needn't oberwate anything 'bout my losin it."

"I certainly shall make no mention of it."

And, to show my indifference, I was on the point of placing it in my pocket unopened when a pardonable curiosity led me to look at the address written in a dainty hand. The name, instead of being "Henry Beyer," was "Mr. Edward Koumure."

Miss Mansley had written the communication to me!

[TO BE CONTINUED.]



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