

# Periwinkle House

by  
OPIE READ

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R.H. LIVINGSTONE

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(Continued)  
CHAPTER VIII

It was a long time before Drace found a boat to set him over to the opposite shore. It was so late when he reached the Bethpage place that he did not go up to his room. The house was so quiet, the bounds themselves asleep, that he stole into the garden to pass the remainder of the night on a couch in the summer house. The air was heavy with roses breathing in through the lattice, and as he straightened out, grateful for repose, this thought came to him:

"Pale they call death, but to me it will ever be red. And I have looked into its red countenance, and was not afraid. I thank God that He gave me that strength. . . . But what a melodrama!"

At the breakfast table, Tylic, with mother tenderness, upbraided Drace for sleeping out for fear of arousing the house. Afterward Drace and the General strolled out under the trees.

"By the way," the General said presently. "I have an engagement to deliver an address before a teachers' meeting in Natchez, and I should much like to have you bear me company. We can leave this evening on the Black Hawk and reach there early in the morning."

"I'd like very much to go," answered Drace. "But can we get back before Thursday?"

"Easily by Wednesday morning. Anything important for Thursday?"

"Oh, no. An old fellow down at the ferry wants me to go fishing with him Thursday, and I gave him my word that I'd be on hand. Most remarkable old man, full of fun; quite a character."

"You must mean old Spence. But are you sure it is not that pretty daughter of his that attracts you? You'll have to be a little careful, my son. We may associate with men out of our social running, but not with women. . . . Ah, Tylic! Mr. Drace has just consented to give me his company to Natchez."

The Black Hawk's band played a welcome, and the captain came down the plank to conduct the General on board. From a quiet, lax and almost deserted landing the place leaped into the full throbs of life. Negroes and shiftless whites came from their hovels to gaze upon the magic splendor of this journeying palace, and the three-shell man stepped ashore to gather up dollars.

Dinner was a state occasion, and after it, the ball. Then their state-rooms—then morning, and Natchez.

The address was to be delivered in the afternoon, and when the time came the General led him over to the hall to hear the speech, imprisoned him without ball in a corner, and there he had to sit. The address was long, academic and dull, and the sufferer mused:

"I don't see why Shottles ever called you a remarkable character."

Everybody came about the General to take his hand. Young women told him that they had never been so thrilled. Drace lied to him, too, swore him an orator.

"Let us walk off alone," said the General.

Slowly they walked at first, but after a time the old gentleman struck a brisker pace, toward the river.

"Now, my boy, as we've got through with those boners of dust out of old carpets, we'll have some fun. Old Colonel Pennington wanted me to go home with him, and he has a delightful house, a gracious wife and handsome daughter, but I had to decline. I've stood about as much now as I can. We'll go down to old Tobe Mason's tavern, under the hill. Tobe is a gentle old fellow, never killed but three men. One of them shot Tobe's leg off and now he wears a peg; and I want to tell you that when he unstraps it and hops around in a fight, he's right middlesome. At a trial in the courthouse here not long ago, the judge issued an order that all deadly weapons must be left with the deputy sheriffs at the door—and sir, they made old Tobe take off his wooden leg."

The tavern was as tough a place as river men could make it. Built of logs, bricks, stone and clapboards, it looked like an architectural stagger, trying to climb the hill. In the main room was the bar. Herein Tobe gave his famous "poem" feast and dances, when the spirit of liquor mounted high enough to swing its partner off the ground.

"Well, I'll be knocked in the head for a steer!" old Tobe cried out, stumping

ing toward the General. "I haven't seed you since the River tuck fire. Well, well! Thinkin' about you the other day. . . . Glad to shake your hand, Mr. Drace. Set right down."

"Tobe, I'm glad to see you," said the General. "And fetch us about two quarts of that summer-grape wine. Let me tell you about it, Drace. We have a wild grape here that gets ripe along in August. It's much larger and is not sour like the fox-grape, and its vine likes to climb about a sassafras sapling. And then you see an umbrella of grapes. Now don't say a word till you've had a good taste of it. Tobe makes it himself, and he'll fetch us some that's at least twenty-five years old. Here we are."

The wine was as red as blood, cool and yet warm. Its flavor was the ripened sweetness of the spirit of autumn, it was as mellow as the scent of the apple at harvest time.

"What do you think of it, boy?"

"Uncle Howard, are you sure that this was not made by Bacchus instead of Tobe?"

"Good, my boy! Enjoying yourself?"

"Yes, I'm doing fine, General. You see, I can't express myself as well as you can. I haven't as much to draw from. You've not only book-knowledge but experience, worth more socially than all the libraries in the world."

"You hit it off well. But what is better than it all? Moral freedom. This table here is rough, with one rheumatic leg slightly drawn; these chairs we sit in, bottomed with strips of hickory bark, would be scorned at a sheriff's sale; but sir, Mark Antony, in his first triumph, his chariot drawn by lions, was not more regal than we are at this moment, enthroned and accepted with moral freedom. Pour out, for as that same Antony said: 'Scout not my cups.'—Tobe, where's that old scoundrel who used to play 'The Arkansas Traveler'?"

Tobe stumped his way over from the bar.

"You mean old Slithers?"

"That's the man. What's become of him?"

"Nothin'. And I reckon he's playin' right now down at Cadman's joint, that ought to be wiped off the earth. Want him?"

"Need him, Tobe. Send a boy after him."

Old Slithers, bald and wrinkled, came with his home-made fiddle. The

General greeted him warmly, introduced him to Drace; and the most comfortable chair in the house provided him, he sat down to play the famous old tune and to recite the dialogue, improvising where his memory failed him.

The General roared his delight, said that he would go on the stand to swear against Sour Socrates in favor of the fiddler's dialogue. "Tobe," he shouted, "fetch in the buck-and-wing dancers."

Tobe went to the door, yelled as if calling hogs; and in came two big negroes, a throng of idlers following them. At it they went, shaking the house, and when weariness threatened to seize them, for refreshment they drew off, and leaping, butted their heads together like goats. After a time the General gave them a dollar apiece, dismissed them—gave the fiddler five, with an order to play that old tune

again. Old Tobe was now lighting his evening lamp. The General called to him.

"Toby, what have you for supper?"

The old fellow closed one eye. "What have I got?" he says. Ah, that's it. An' I'll tell you. I've got hoe-cake and roasted doves."

"No, you don't mean it!"

"Hoe-cake and roasted doves, I said."

"Good, by Gideon's Band. Fetch up, Tobias. And mark you, along with it all bring about a trowel full of that wild plum jelly."

The doves and the strips of bacon and the hoe-cake and the jelly came on, and arising the General saluted the repeat.

"Talk about quail! Quail, sir, is insipid, white, dry and tasteless compared with the dark richness of the dove. And look at this bread, made of milled pearl. You never tasted any bacon like that, my son, fed on scums showered down from Olympus. . . . The sweet of the night!"

They had finished the meal and were sitting back, smoking, sipping wine, when Drace noticed a sudden change in the General's countenance, a tightening, a grimace; and turning about, he saw standing against the wall a strange figure—a man not tall, but broad of shoulder, his body sloping lithely down to feet expressively of sinewy restlessness. His mass of hair was like tangled fax straw, dark and yet gray. Like the bristles of a wild bear, his short mustache stuck out and his heavy eyebrows looked like great hairy caterpillars crawling across his lower forehead. In his dress there was a wild touch, a barbaric aspect. Slowly he came forward.

"This is General Bethpage, heh?"

"That is my name, yes. What do you want with me?"

"What I want; heh? I come to 'police to think them mule be mine.'"

"Well, go on away. I don't want any apology from you."

"No? You put pistol at me. That was in Louisiana. This is Mississippi. An' I tell you here you haf turn' car-petbagger."

"What! If General Andrew Jackson should arise out of his grave and tell me that, do you know what I would say to him?"

"You would beg hece pardon as you will mine, heh?"

"I would say to him as I now say to you: You are an infamous liar."

Drace sprang between them and seized the man by the wrist; a dirk fell from his hand.

"Stand back, General," cried Drace. "There is not going to be a fight here. Stand back, Tobe!"

The dark-faced man looked Drace in the eye.

"Monsieur was ver' strong. But—I see him some other day."

Turning, the fellow made off.

"Now, who the devil was that?" asked Drace.

"That, my dear Drace," replied the General, "was the fellow you asked about the other day—Stepho la Vitte."

To Drace this encounter with Stepho la Vitte, the father of the girl he loved—and the outlaw upon whom he had sworn to wreak vengeance—was disturbing indeed. The General, however, was not at all upset by the fact that he had been barely saved from Stepho's knife, and when a short time later they boarded the Bumblebee on their return, he gripped Major Pennington's hand and said:

"Major, Mr. Drace and I have in our precious possession three quarts of old Tobe's wild grape."

"Ha—which is as much as to say that you have three quarts stewed out of the heart of Venus. I'll send Hawkins and the four of us will gather in the Texas and—and fatter the stars, by gad! But Tobe lied—said he didn't have any of the old stock left."

"And a liar's wine is sweet, my dear Major. Come, Virgil, my boy, put all brooding out of your mind. Brooding is for the poet when the nag is tired, and not for us. We'll have a night of it, and then we'll return to respectable servitude and slow moral decay. My dear Major, lead on. We follow."

The remainder of the trip back to Bethpage was a matter of moral freedom at the gaming table for the General. For Drace it was occupied with the hot struggle between thoughts of his grim mission against Stepho, and his longing for Nadine. For the time being, however, the beautiful girl who had rescued him from the burning hut triumphed.

Presently the Bumblebee made Bethpage Landing. And the General's hospitality was at once so warm and so gracious that Drace felt no hesitancy in remaining for the time being under his roof—until Shottles' return, at least. That night after dinner when his wife, Tylic, had left, the old gentleman lit a cigar and for a long time sat smoking in silence; and Drace was silent, too, looking through the lattice at the moon, love's slow timepiece stopped and stagnant in the sky.

"Virgil?"

"Yes, General."

"Have you a pistol, sir?"

"No; I had one, but I lost it."

"Well, provide yourself with another. In saving me from a deadly assault you have mortally offended old La Vitte. He is in no wise afraid; but neither is he gallant, and would shoot you without warning. You told me you remember of your appointment to meet old Spence tomorrow. I haven't any too much confidence in him; he might play you into the hands of Stepho, and I advise you not to go fishing with him."

"Spence. No that's not the name of the old fellow I'm going with. His name is—Spillars, I think."

"I don't know a man of that name in the neighborhood. But, anyway, arm yourself and keep a sharp lookout."

And then they sat and smoked in silence, inhaling the smoky breath of the night.

## CHAPTER IX

With the first gleam of Thursday's light Nadine arose and stood looking out from the window. Her father had come in late and was to depart again early for the hills, but she was afraid lest he might have changed his mind. She heard him moving about, but she waited a long time before she went to meet him, so sweet it was to stand there at the window to catch the first ray of the sun.

The old man hummed a joggled tune; in a garden of melody it would have



The Old Man Hummed a Joggled Tune.

been a brier. Nadine came out, and gallantly he kissed her hand, laughing softly; and then as was his wont, he kissed her hair.

Her duties about the house were light, but he helped her, and when their queer assortment of plates and dishes, gold-rimmed china, crockery, stoneware and tin plate had been washed and put away, they sat in the shade of the house, the girl anxious and wondering.

"I have sent Tony back to the coety, as I tell you I will," he said to her. "He does the good work to burn the spy, the carpetbagger. Now he have spree, with the red wine an' the white. When the time come, he be back. I have need of him with the cattle that I buy. He drive them. . . . Up to the town Natchez I have trouble. The old scoundrel Bethpage! I go in the 'ax', an' he is there, sing, laugh, eat an' look at the darky dance. I wait. Then I go up. We have words. He jump up. Then the young man, big, he grab my wrist like this. He squeeze. I say: 'Monsieur you was ver' strong. I see you again.' An' when I do, I feel keen. I hear old Bethpage call him Vergeel. The old man I feel too, eh?"

"Oh, no—no!" she cried. "Let us go away somewhere. They will never let you alone. It will be better to be in the city than here."

"Just a little while longer we stay in this place, eh? Then we meet Monsieur Boyce in Memphis, an' you marry him, an' he take you away for the honeymoon, peraps to France. An' he buy you the silk dresses, an' many beautiful things. An' then I come and join you, an' we all live happy—eh?"

"But—but I do not like Monsieur Boyce!"

"Ha! You learn soon. He is a fine man. Wait till we see him in Memphis, an' you know him better. I will love him then, an' be happy. . . . I go now. An' revoir, ma petite."

Stepho went down to his boat, feeling that he had outwitted her impudence of the swamp, and she ran back to her room to gaze through the window. But soon she came out with a big leatherbound book of plays and put it on the ground beneath the oaks. These with a broom made of stiff twigs she swept the ground, unstrapping a cat-o'-riddle swinging down and carried it away out of the range of her stage. From the house she brought a narrow strip of rush matting, spread it beneath a tree, raising one edge as if to form of it a sort of back, a sofa. From the house she brought a box, to serve for a table, and from out beyond the palisade of cane she gathered lilies, plucking from the bank a great bloom that looked like a trumpet. These she hung on the low-arching branches of her playhouse trees, or with sharp thorns pinned them to the rugged bark; a curtain to drape the wall above her "pretend-like" divan. She sat down and waited a long time. The cane stirred, and she seized her book, opened where a lily-stem marked her favorite play, and made herself believe that she was reading.

It was only a breeze that rustled in the cane. She could hear it now, slipping amid the glossy leaves above her. Why should she be impatient? She said wait. Had she not waited night

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after night for her father's footsteps? Had she not sat in the house, alone and not afraid, when the storm tangled the tops of the cypress trees and lashed the bayou mad? . . . She had not heard a sound, but looking by chance, she saw Drace coming through the cane, and she sprang up to meet him, the play-book pressed against her bosom.

"Nadine."

"Monsieur!"

"Don't call me 'Monsieur.' Call me Virgil."

She dropped her book. He bent to pick it up, but she snatched it from beneath his reaching hand and stood back from him.

"Oh, it was you, then! It was you the so strong man that would break my father's wrist. It was you!"

"Nadine, it was not to hurt him. With a knife he would have killed an old man; and then they would have hanged him. Nadine, my other hand held yours, to protect you."

"It must be true. I will believe you—Virgil. I know you brave and not wish to hurt an old man. No, you could not do that. You will forgive me, yes?"

She held forth her hand and taking it tenderly, he touched it with his lips; and like a princess she accepted the homage due her rank and her beauty.

"Come, now, we play," she said, sweetly laughing. "And it must be free, like the boy and the girl. But first you sit down here and tell me."

She led him to her "sofa" and they sat down, leaning back against the tree.

"Tell you what, Nadine?"

"About the great big world you know so well."

"I don't know the big world, as you think it. But I know the universe as I feel it. It is here."

About her finger she sat wrapping the lily-stem that had marked her favorite play. Was it that she did not understand his reference to his universe? No, for she shook her head, and with a sigh that did not mean weariness.

"The universe could not be on this little island."

"It could be held in your dimpled hand."

"Oh, my hand dimpled!" She held it in front of him, touched his brow with the palm.

"It is not soft enough to be dimpled, Virgil."

"I would kiss it soft."

He caught her wrist, touched the tip of each finger with his lips and then kissed the palm. She laughed, drawing back her hand.

"You must not do that. We must talk of other things."

"Yes, but first let me tell you of my dream."

"I do not like to hear dreams. We always forget them and make up something we did not dream. . . . But did you not tell me once?"

"No, I don't think so. In my dream you touched my heart with a torch and set it afire."

"But I would not do that. I would save you from the fire. Ah, and Tony he has gone to the city, but when he comes back, we must watch close. . . . One time he tried to take my hand, and he said he would kiss me. And I say: 'That may be, Tony. You can kiss me because you stronger. But when you have, then you be dead.' And he knew that I speak what was to come."

"We care nothing for him. Let him keep out of my way. . . . And when I saw you at the ball, I knew that you were the girl with the torch. And do you know what I said to myself? Let me whisper it to you."

"There is no one to hear."

"I said: 'You are to be my wife.' And just then you turned about and looked at me."

"But I did not see you."

"Come, now, you must have seen me."

"Well, perhaps. But I did not say: 'I am to be his wife.' No, I did not say that. And it cannot be, Virgil."

"But it is going to be, all the same, and you know it. Why, what is all this universe for if that is not to be? Why was this little island cast up here? Why did the word ring forth: 'Let there be light'? It is part of the plan of creation, and nothing can prevent it. . . . I shall have to wait, but I—"

"Will wait a long time, Virgil. But we must not talk like that. Come—let us forget such things."

She put her spell on him, and he was a boy again. Hand in hand they walked about, pretending that the acre island was miles and miles in extent. Time was a day-star shooting unseen across the sky, and then a heavy sentence fell upon him. It was time for him to go. In the cane she stood with him where his canoe was moored. He held her hand, drawing her toward him, but she took it away.

"No—no, you must not. . . . Quick, Virgil, you must go now. The sun is low."

(To be continued)

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