

"THE MIDLANDERS"

By Charles Tenney Jackson

(Continued From Last Week)

"The land o' joy!" he cried, shining-eyed. "That's where you'll lead us to!" He motioned to the Indian woman. "We'll take this yere little girl and drift 'way off yander to all the places she ain't ever seen. First, we'll pole the ole john-boat down to Grand Isle so she'll see the ocean. Then we'll drift off Atchafalaya way ar I she'll see the big woods. Then we'll drift on north and west and every way, and she'll see all the states and countries! What names is them I done told you, Aurelie—the music names?"

"California," she said simply.

"And next one?"

"Arizona."

"And Montany, and Ioway and Tennessee and Ohio! All them we'll see and more! Lead us to the land o' joy!"

And all her strange after-life of laughter and of tears the little girl remembered the old soldier waving his hand to the undiscovered countries. And always she knew he was at heart the poet, the adventurer, the lover, whatever else he might be; nothing could change that.

So the next day they piled old traps and boxes and blankets and hound pups and the five wooden legs of Captain Tinkletoes as keepsakes, into the john-boat and set off to find the land of joy with music names. South and east through brilliant wildernesses, polling through lily jams, sailing swamp lakes, paddling salt marashes. Shrimp camps, oyster platforms, terrapin hunters of Grand Isle—they wandered and worked, and Aurelie came to know other children of all hues and races, and at the island balls learned to dance with orange blossoms in her hair. The murmur of the sea was in her ears, the moonlight on the oaks in her eyes, and with the droning Creole violins she awakened to gaiety, losing the droll seriousness of a savage. Also, for the first time, she had her face washed cleanly—by the storekeeper's wife who knew then she was not of the undecipherable Chino-Spanish-Filipino breed of the shrimp platform villages. But when the balls were over, a shifty-footed and suspicious savage woman took Aurelie and led her off to their ragged tent. Always through the blur of queer faces—black, brown, yellow, white—Aurelie remembered the watchful love in the eyes of the basket-maker and of uncle Michigan. Always for these were what she knew of love!

From the Gulf-coast islands they went west and north, and in the years the child became a girl, slender, lithe, swift—keen of eye on a deer trail, trapping the mink and raccoons, following the wild bees' flight, weaving baskets with strong brown fingers to lure the shrimp from under the lilies, balancing herself to shoot in a ticklish "running pirouette" that would steal through the swamps where a heavier hunter dared not follow. Thus she grew, with never a qualm for the blood of the hunted nor a doubt of the Maker's intent. But at twelve she was a woman, blithe and unthinking and kind-hearted, without fear, without guile.

Perhaps!

At any rate, one day, censured by the Indian woman, she stole from camp, swam Grand River with her gaudy little gown tucked in a knot on her head, dressed in the woods and appeared at a Cajun ball—with a wild hyacinth in her hair. She danced and laughed and bewildered the woodsmen, pretending to know no English when the Yankees addressed her, and no French when spoken to in that tongue. But standing in the heated "ballroom", she sang a barbaric song the Indian woman had taught her, posed with an odd theatrical fancy, and then ran away leaving them gaping.

When she swam to the john-boat at dawn and put her hand upon Michigan's as he fished, he started, tried to swear helplessly and stopped.

"Dammie! How we goin' to do if you act that-a-way?"

"Which-a-way?" And she drew up her naked little body, poised on the boat, pressed her hands over her swelling breasts and stared to the north. "Michigan, when air we goin' to see all the states and lands with the music names you tell of?"

"Aurelie, you air gettin' to be such a big girl and such a pretty girl as I dunno if we ought to let you see all them countries."

"Then I'll run off and see 'em myself!"

But at last they came out on the mighty river that Michigan had not seen since he left his leg at Vicksburg; and another year found them at Mem-

phis among the charty-boat folk. Then a government dredge towed them up river, the Bia woman cooking for the crew. The men used to watch a child who, from her house-boat deck, would put a bit of tinsel or a flower in her hair and stare down in the water to admire the picture, or would smooth her gipsy dress over her hips, unnoticing her audience. If they hailed her she pretended not to hear them. They would not believe she was but thirteen, so tropically primal was her womanhood, so tantalizingly wise her reserve.

So, up the great river of her dreams they went for months and months. Then, one night on the Minnesota shore, the dredge burned, and Uncle Michigan cut the house-boat loose. It bumped on down the river again to come aimlessly adrift in a pocket of the Iowa hills. There it stuck, and all the dreamy summer the weeds and sands thickened about until it could drift no more.

And one day the exiles climbed a near-by hill to look down on a town buried in September maples; a decent church spire here and there, the clock tower of the court-house in the square, and farmer folk driving homeward.

On this proxy common day of the northern midlands, Aurelie, with the good-humored curiosity of a savage, looked down for her first glimpse of an ordered life. Out of the sweet and heavy richness of the corn bloom and the sugar trees, from a white house, half-hidden, came a piano's notes, the first she had ever heard.

She clapped her little brown hands. "Done come! Michigan, I reckon we found some of them states and countries with the music names. We-all come to the land o' joy!"

CHAPTER II.

When I Was a Kid.

In September, looking from the court-house Square of Rome, one sees the ripening corn like a bronze shield on the hills which close every street end beyond the arching sugar trees. The bottoms, too, are choked by the lust of the corn, and the church spires and the ragged sycamores along the roadsides rise out of this opulent sea from the rive to the bluffs as if drowning in the perfume of the tassels. These west bluffs alone seem to evade the conquest; one sees a road winding up a red gap among groves of oak, hickory, walnut; with the crimson sumac and alders showing a lighter soil, the upland croppings of shale, clay and stony ridges. Here one has glimpses of clover and oat stubble, rounded stacks, barns, windmills, white farm homes and wire fences about shaded pastures. But beyond, the triumphant sea of the corn stretches north and west across the Iowa Midlands, for there is no trace of the virgin soil, the short grass as the Indians rode it when the settlers of the forties came.

It is a land fat to bursting with numberless rich and complacent little cities. The county annals show you that the people never have hungered, fought nor suffered. From the first every man had his bag of silver under the punch-eon floor of his cabin and went forth to buy the acres as the Sacs and Foxes moved away. The second year they ate their own corn with the venison and prairie chicken; their schools and churches were built before the oak in their own cabin homes was dry; and the first grand jury of this Iowa county sat in the untrodden grass of what is now Rome's main street and indited a territorial commissioner for nonfeasance. It was significant; the first Midlanders were insurgents of conscience and not hunger-rebellious, for never had they felt want or known sacrifice.

The Indians called it "The Land of Beautiful Rivers", and few towns there are which have not a stream loitering near over clear pebbly bars and along blue-stem margins where the wild grapes and crabapples lure the children autumn long. Through Rome, therefore, flows Sinsinawa Creek sleeping the summer in leaf-lined, sweet-smelling pools along the shady streets where the boys fish for shiners with their hats; and where, in October, the water having dried, the oak and maple leaves drift deep so that, by Hallowe'en all the town is filled with the pungent smell of the smoke.

Rome is in a continual grandmotherly quarrel with Sinsinawa Creek; never has it been able to reason sobriety into the laughing jade which tumbles its June freshets down from the bluffs, fills every hollow of the wandering streets and vacant lots, plays mischief with fences and walks and goes its way to the Mississippi across the bottoms, leaving its mir-

rored pools to taunt the ancient dame of a town with its wilfulness. Yet Rome so loves the wanton that when Earlville wanted to divert its waters in the uplands to run a factory for that aggressive metropolis of the county, the protest that went up echoed for years in local politics. Earlvillians called it "Sin Creek", or "Skunk Creek", but what could one expect of Earlville?

In Rome when a tree interferes with a sidewalk the walk is not built; in Earlville the tree is cut down and the cement laid. That is why Earlville has the railroad, the furniture factory and the Elks' Club, while Rome has only its memories, its rusty fences and its best families. And the county court-house. The court-house offices and the best families were a tradition as venerably intertwined as the ivy and bricks of the walls. Rome knew its position. It would have sat with dignity on its hills only Skunk Creek—I beg pardon, Sinsinawa!—kept pushing it off.

Yet none in Rome more than mildly censured Sinsinawa. Not even Wiley T. Curran of the Rome News, who was always bothering the town board about street improvements. He ought to have known better. Every one having county business had to come to Rome. If one didn't like the streets one could go to—Earlville.

Wiley T. Curran used to retort that a good many had. Rome contained not nearly so many people as it did when the war closed. Earlville, then, was merely one of Thaddeus Tanager's cow pastures. Earlville welcomed any one who would "hustle" as the Boosters' Club put. Rome did not care to have people about whose families nothing was known. Every one there had lived in Rome since 1860 at least. Even the obnoxious Mr. Curran's progenitors, and some of the old families tolerated the News solely because Pat Curran founded it before the court-house was built. But those families were few, for Pat Curran had been one of the fighting abolitionists, and southern Iowa was noticeably in the stream of the Kentucky and Virginia migrations during the secession prelude. To this day these lover counties are known as "The Reserve", and have ever stood aloof from the rampant republicanism of the militant North and West. In Rome still exists dim traditions of Tully's raid and the copperheadism that was smothered in the triumph of the Northern arms. It lends a political conservatism and a "best family" air to society, and accounts for the tumble-down fences, unpaved streets and Arcadian corner lots. It also furnished Curran, of the News, with editorials.

But no one who was any one minded Curran. In Rome everybody who was anybody had money. In these rich and mature days, having the static order of the East and a stationary population, more than a generation of young men had gone off from the priceless corn lands of the county to the cheaper acres of the Canadas, or the irrigated valleys of California and New Mexico or to the cities. Retired farmers moving into town for the schools and freedom from stock-feeding, did not compensate for the drain of younger blood. Curran lamented this. But Curran himself had gone off to swing the circle of the West for a decade and come back a beggar to take up the News on his father's death. And now the News could cackle as it pleased about progressiveness and keeping the young men in the county for their fresh spirit and lustier ideals. No one minded—none of the best people. Anybody who was anybody wouldn't think of moving away.

Except Mr. Curran. He wondered why he had come back. Sentiment brought him as it had sent him forth, as it directed most of his affairs. Sentiment, this September afternoon, kept him sitting on a bale of stock paper in front of the News office watching the town kids bat flies on the vacant lot next to him. It was press day, the week's issue was run off and Aleck and Jim Mims, the tramp printer, were wrapping the mail list to take to the postoffice in the wheelbarrow. Mr. Curran ought to have been busy, but he smoked and watched the town kids. In that same lot he batted flies with the same fence for a back-stop, yelled the same derision at the pitcher, broke the same windows and fled down the same alley when old Marshal Pee came doddering from the court-house on complaint of the Widow Steger. Mr. Curran could sentimentally forget that he was thirty-nine.

A clamor of the high-school football practice came from behind the curtain of yellowing sugar trees on High

street. Only the younger town kids still lingered at the summer diversion of fly-batting, and for every urchin who hung his bare legs over the News walk in the tarweed, waiting his turn, there were at least two dogs. As Jim Mims said, all the yelps and kyoodles in town were there. Mr. Curran sentimentally wished he had a dog—he felt himself a man worthy a good dog. He listened to Aleck slapping the paste on the wrappers and watched the kyoodles yawning around the kids' feet, scratching their spines in the tarweed and grinning up with all the pleasure of it, and he said suddenly aloud:

"Gee, I wish I had a dog!"

Then somebody whom he had not noticed—a big dusty man wearing a new and absurdly small derby hat—stopped with his hand on the hitching-post before the News and retorted:

"Gee, I wish I had a dog!"

The editor turned and then stood up and yelled. And the big dusty man took his hand and he yelled.

"Wiley, old top!"

"Rube, you old Indian!"

Rube grinned all over his swarthy face. "Old top, how are you?"

"High, wife and handsome!"

"You don't look that last, Wiley. How's the old lady?"

"Aunt Abby's fit as silk. Come up to dinner."

"I intended to. Hey, the kids still playing ball on the lot like they did when I was a kid!"

"Season closed, Rube? Where did your bunch wind up?"

"In the cellar. I'm through with the game, Wiley. I can't throw to second no more. My arm's all in. No more of this bush-league ball for me. Carmichael's still got that job for me—chambermaid to his livery horses!"

Mr. Curran laughed sorrowfully. So did Rube Van Hart. He rubbed his big red hands and then a telltale red nose and looked down at the town kids who had assembled to gaze in awe. One raced off to the high-school practice to spread the news: "Hi, Rube Van Hart's got back!"

Everybody knew Rube. Poor old Rube! The whole nation knew Rube a while back—let's see? Was it with the Cubs, 1901 or '02? Eh, the bubble reputation! There were other mighty men now. Rube had gone back to the "bush".

"Next spring," went on the former leaguer, "I'll stay and coach the high-school bunch, Wiley."

"No, you won't," smiled the editor. "When you begin to read the Sunday saps, and spring training opens up down in San Antonio you'll be missing some fine morning. Gone to help break in the Cub recruits, and then you'll play out the season with the Cotton League or the Three-C."

"No more. Here's my firish, Wiley—right here where I learned the game next the News lot. Back in the old town where you come back, too, Wiley. Back where we was kids together."

The editor looked wistfully across the court-house square. The big leaguer's glance followed. A bar of the sunset lighted the dingy old court-house. The windows were open. From the court room above came the voice of some lawyer droning his plea to a farmer jury. In an office on the lower floor one could see a woman bent seriously over a desk littered with papers and reports.

"The old red, west-side school," murmured Rube. "And there's Janet Vance, and now she's county superintendent, and I'm all in, and you're a fool editor. That girl got ahead of us all, Wiley, since we was kids together."

Wiley sighed. He pulled his short brown beard, that Vandylke which, in Rome, lent him a foreign air and gave him the reputation of being literary, whatever that meant. Nobody, not even the fool editor, knew exactly. Yet nobody was afraid of Mr. Curran. The kids spoke of him as "Wiley"; all the old women came in to tell him their neighborhood troubles; and on High street the best families ignored him, even with their irritated feeling that on points of the worldly manner he was infinitely better versed than they, and that he was laughing at them. It was known that Mr. Curran had been to Europa. It was rumored that he had been in jail. One can learn a deal in each. Mr. Curran, it seems, had learned to laugh.

"Every time I come back to the old town," mused Rube, "I wonder why you didn't marry Janet. Everybody thought you would." He added apologetically: "She thought you would."

Wiley shrugged. Old friends can say much and hurt little.

"Why the blazes," resumed Rube, "don't you marry her yet? You ain't