

Down the River

Harriet Prescott Spofford

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She was of pure race, black as her first ancestor,—if, indeed, she ever had an ancestor, and were not an indigenous outcrop of African soil,—so black that the sun could gild her. Her countenance was as unlovely as it is possible for one to be that owns the cheeriest of smiles and the most dazzling of teeth. It would have been difficult to say how old she was, though she had the effect of being undersized, and, with sharp shoulders, elbows, and knees, seemed scarcely possessed of a rounded muscle in all her lithe and agile frame.

Nevertheless, she was a dancer by profession,—if she could have dignified her most frequent occupation by the title of profession. With a thin blue scarf turbaned round her head in floating ends, and with scanty and clinging array otherwise, tossing a tambourine, and singing wild, meaningless songs, she used to whirl and spring on the grass-plot of an evening, the young masters and mistresses smiling and applauding from the verandah, while the wind-blown flame of a flaring pitch-pine knot, held by little Pluto, gave her strange careering shadows for partner.

She had not yet been allotted to any particular task by day, now running the errands of the house, now tending the sick, now, in punishment of misdemeanors, relieving an exhausted hand in the field,—for, though all along the upland lay the piny woods of the turpentine-orchards, she belonged to an estate whose rich lowlands were devoted to cotton-bearing. But whatever she did by day, she danced by night, with her wild gyration and gesture, as naturally as a moth flies; and when not in demand with the seignior, was wont to perform in even keener force and fire at the quarters, to an admiring circle of her own kind, with ambitious imitators on the outskirts.

It was not, however, an indiscriminate assemblage even there that encouraged her rude art. There are circles within circles, and the more decorous of the slaves gave small favor to the young posturer, although the patronage she received from the house enabled her to meet their disapprobation defiantly; while to the younger portion, in the vague sense that there was something wrong about it, her dance became surrounded by all the attraction and allurements of seeing life. It was not that the frowning ones did not go through many of the same motions themselves; but theirs were occasioned by the frenzy of religious excitement, where pious rapture and ecstasy were to be expressed by nothing but the bodily exertion of the Shout: the objectless dance of the dancer was a thing beyond their comprehension, dimly at first, and then positively, associated with sin. But she laughed them down with a gibe; she felt triumphant in the possession of her secret, known to none of them: her dance was not objectless, but the perpetual expression of all emotions, whether of beauty or joy or gratitude or praise. Some one at the house had given her a pair of little hoops with bells attached, which she was wont to wear about her ankles, and it afforded her malicious enjoyment to scatter her opponents by the tintinnabulation of her step. For all that levity, she was not destitute of her peculiar mode of adoration. For the religion of the Shout she had no absorbents whatever; she furtively watched it, and openly ridiculed it; but she had a religion of her own, notwithstanding,—a sort of primitive and grand religion, Fetich though it was. She reasoned, that the kindly brown earth produces us, bears us along on its flight, nourishes us, gives us the delights of life, takes us back into its bosom at last. She worshipped the great dark earth, imparted to it her confidence, asked of it her boons. As she grew older, and her logic or her fancy strengthened, she might have felt the sun supplying the earth, and the beings of the earth, with all their force, and have become a fire-worshipper, until further light broke on her, and she sought and found the Power that feeds the very sun himself. But at present the dust of which she was made was what she could best comprehend. So, fortified by her inward faith, and feeling herself fast friends with the ancient earth, she continued to ring her silver bells and spin her bare twinkling feet with contented disregard of those, few of whom in their unseemly worship had the faintest idea of what it was that ailed them.

Although known by various titles on the plantation, objurgatory among the hands, facetious among the heads, such as Dancing Devil, Spinning Jenny, Tarantella, Herodias's Daughter,—which last, simplifying itself into Salome, became in its diminutives the most prevalent,—the creature had a name of her own, the softest of

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syllables. Black and uncouth as she was, a word, one of those the whitest and most beautiful, named her; and since they tell us that every appellation has its significance for the wearer, we must suppose that somewhere in her soul that white and blossoming thing was to be found which answered to the name of Flor.

She possessed a kind of freehold in the cabin of an old negress yclept Zoe; but she seldom claimed it, for Zoe was outspoken; she preferred, instead, to lie down by night on a mat in Miss Emma's room, in a corner of the staircase, on the hall-floor, oftenest fallen wherever sleep happened to overtake her;—having so many places in which to lay her head was very like having none at all. She was at the bidding of every one, but seldom received a heavy blow; as for a round of angry words, she liked nothing better. She fell heir to much flimsy finery, as a matter of course, and to many a tidbit, cake or sweetmeat; she made herself gaudy as a butterfly with the one, and never went into a corner with the other. Of late, however, the finery and the delicacies had become more uncommon things: Miss Emma wore a homespun gingham; her muslins, and Miss Agatha's, draped the windows,—for curtains and carpets had all gone to camp; bacon had ceased to be given out to the hands, who lived now on corn-meal and yams; the people at the house were scarcely better off,—for, though, as no army had passed that way, the chickens still peopled the place, they were reserved for special occasions, and it was only at rare intervals that one indulged at table in the luxury of a fowl. This was no serious regret to Flor on her own account: the less viands, the less dishes, she could oftener pause in the act of wiping a plate and perform an original hornpipe by herself, tossing the thin translucent china, and rapping it with her knuckles till it rang again. She had, however, a pang once when she saw Miss Emma lunching with relish on cold sweet potato. She spent all the rest of the day floating on the tide in an old abandoned scow secured by a long rope to the bank, and afterwards wading up and down the bed of a brook that ran into the river, until, having left a portion of her provision, to be sure, at Aunt Zoe's cabin, she busied herself over a fire out-of-doors, and served up at last before Miss Emma as savory a little terrapin stew as ever simmered on coals, capering over her success, and standing on her head in the midst of all her scattered embers, afterwards, with pure delight. The next day she came in at noon from the woods, a mile down the river-bank, with her own dark lips cased and coated in golden sweets, and, after a wordy skirmish with the cook, presented to Miss Emma a great cake of brown and fragrant honey from a nest she had discovered and neglected in better seasons, and said nothing about her half-dozen swollen and smarting stings. Mas'r Rob having shouldered his gun and taken himself off, and Mas'r Andersen having followed his example, but not his footsteps, long ago, there was nobody to fill the deficiencies of the larder with game; and thus Flor, with her traps and nets and devices, making her value felt every day, became, for Miss Emma's sake, a petted person, was put on more generous terms with those above her, and allowed a freedom of action that no other servant on the place dreamed of desiring. Such consideration was very acceptable to the girl, who was well content to go fasting herself a whole day, provided Miss Emma condescended to her offerings, and, in turn, vouchsafed her her friendship. She had no such daring aspirations towards the beautiful Miss Agatha, young Mas'r Andersen's wife, and admired her at an awful distance, never venturing to offer her a bit of broiled lark, or set before her a dish of crabs—beaming back with a grin from ear to ear, if Miss Agatha so much as smiled on her, breaking into the wildest of dances and shuffling out the shrillest of tunes after every such incident. Moreover, Miss Agatha was hedged about with a dignity of grief, and the indistinct pity given her made her safe from other intrusion; for Mas'r Andersen, in bringing home a Northern wife, had brought home Northern principles, and, in his sudden escape forced to leave her in the only home she had, was away fighting Northern battles. This was a dreadful thing, and Mas'r Andersen was a traitor to somebody,—so much Flor knew,—it might be the Government, it might be the South, it might be Miss Agatha; her ideas were nebulous. Whatever it was, Mas'r Rob and his gun were on the other side, and woe be to Mas'r Andersen when they met! Mas'r Rob and his friends were beating back the men that meant to take away Flor and all her kind to freeze and starve; 't was very good of him, Flor thought, and there ceased consideration. Meanwhile, wherever Mas'r Andersen might be, and whether he were so much as alive or not, Miss Agatha was not the one that knew; and Flor adapted many a rigadon to her conjectured feelings, now swaying and bending with sorrow and longing, head fallen, arms outstretched, now hands clasped on bosom, exultant in welcome and possession.

The importance to which Flor gradually rose by no means led her to the exhibition of any greater decorum; on the contrary, it seemed to impart to her the secret of perpetual motion; and, aware of her impunity, she danced with fresher vigor in the very teeth of her censors and their reproaches.

"Go 'long wid yer capers, ye Limb!" said Zoe to her, late one afternoon, as she entered with the half of a rabbit

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she had caught, and, having deposited it, went through the intricacies of her most elaborate figure in breathless listening to an unheard tune. "Ef I had dem sticks o' legs, dey 'd do berrer work nor twirlin' me like I was a factotum."

At this, Flor suddenly spun about on the tip of one toe for the space of three minutes, with a buzzing noise like that of a top in hot motion, pausing at last to inquire, "Well, Maum Zoe, an' w'at's dat?" and be off again in another whirl.

"I'd red Mas'r Henry ob sich a wurfless nigger."

"Wurfless?" inquired Flor, still spinning.

"Wuss'n wurfless."

"How'd y' do it?"

"I'd jus' foller dat ar Sarp," said Zoe, turning over the rabbit, and considering whether a pepper-corn and a little onion out of her own patch wouldn't improve the broth she meant to make of it.

"Into de swamps?" said Flor, in a high key. "Sarp's a fool. I heerd Mas'r Henry say so. Dey'll gib him a blue-pill, for sartain."

"Humph!" said Aunt Zoe, as if she could say a great deal more.

"Tell ye w'at, Maum Zoe," replied Flor, shaking her sidelong head at every syllable, and accentuating her remarks with her forefinger and both her little sparkling eyes, "I'll 'form on ye for 'ticin' Mas'r Henry's niggers run away."

"None o' yer sass here!" said Maum Zoe, with a flashing glance.

"You take my rabbit, you mus' hab my sass," answered Flor, delicacy not being ingrain with her. "W'at 'ud I cut for to de swamps, d' ye s'pose?" she said, slapping the soles of her feet in her emphasis, and pausing for breath. "Dar neber was a lash laid on dat back"—

"No fault o' dat back, dough," interposed Aunt Zoe.

"Dar neber was a lash on dat back. Dar a'n't a person on de place hab sich treatem as dis yere Limb o' yourn. Miss Emma done gib me her red ribbins on'y Sa'd'y for my har. An' Mas'r Henry, he jus' pass an' say to me, 'Dono w'at Miss Emma 'd do widout ye, Lomy. Scairt, ye hussy!' So!"

"Zackly. We's 'mos' w'ite, we be! How much dey do make ob us up to de house! De leopard hab change him spots, an' we hab change our skin! W'at's de use o' bein' free, when we's w'ite folks a'ready? Tell me dat!" said Aunt Zoe, turning on her witheringly, rising from a deep curtsy and smoothing down her apron. "Tell ye w'at, ye Debil's spinster!" added she, with a sudden change of tone, as Flor began to mimic one of Miss Agatha's opera-tunes and with her hands on her hips slowly balance up and down the room, and came at last, bending far on one side, to leer up in the face of her elder with such a smile as Cubas was wont to give her Spanish lover in the dance. "So mighty free wid yer dancin', 'pears like you'll come to dance at a rope's end! W'at's de use o' talkin' to you? 'Mortal sperit, it's my b'lief dat ar mockin'-bird in de branches hab as good a lookout!"

"Heap better," said Flor, acquiescently, and beginning to hold a whistling colloquy with the hidden voice.

"You won't bring him down wid yer tunes. He knows w'en he's well off; he's free, he is,—swingin' onto de bough, an' 'gwine whar he like."

"Leet de chil' alone, Zoe," said a superannuated old woman sitting in the corner by the fire always smouldering on Zoe's hearth, and leaning her white head on her cane. "You be berrer showin' her her duty in her place dan be makin' her discontented."

"She doan' make me disconnected, Maum Susie," said Flor. "'F he's free, w'at's he stayin' here for? Dar's law for dat. Doan' want none o' yer free niggers hangin' roun' dis yere. Chirrup!"

"Dar's a right smart chance ob 'em, dough, jus' now," said Aunt Zoe, chuckling at first, and then breaking into the most boisterous of laughs. "Seems like we's all ob us, ebery one, free as Sarp hisse'f. Mas'r Linkum say so. Yah, ha, ha!"

"Linkum!" said Flor, "Who dat ar? some o' yer poor w'ite trash? Mas'r Henry doan' say so!"

"W'a' 's de matter wid dat ar boy Sarp, Zoe?" recommenced Flor, after a pause. "Mus' hab wanted suffin,—powerful,—to lib in de swamp, hab de dogs after him, an' a bullet troo de head mos' likely."

"Jus' dat. Wanted him freedom," said Zoe suddenly, with crackling stress, her eyes getting angry in their fervor, as she went on. "Wanted him body for him own. Tired o' usin' 'noder man's eyes, 'noder man's han's. Wanted him han's him own, wanted him heart him own! Had n' no breff to breathe 'cep' w'at Mas'r Henry gib out."

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Di'n' t'ink no t'oughts but Mas'r Henry's. Wanted him wife some day to hisse'f, wanted him chillen for him own property. Wanted to call no man mas'r but de Lord in heaben!"

"W'y, Maum Zoe, how you talk! Sarp hadn' no wife."

"Neber would, w'ile he wor a slave."

"Hist now, Zoe!" said the old woman.

"I jus' done b'lieve you's a bobolitionist!" said Flor, with wide eyes and a battery of nods.

"No 'casion, no 'casion," said Zoe, with the deep inner chuckle again. "We's don 'bolished,—dat's w'at we is! We's a free people now. No more work for de 'bominationists!" And on the point of uncontrollable hilarity, she checked herself with the dignity becoming her new position. "You's your own nigger now, Salome," said she.

"We? No, t'ank you. I 'longs to Miss Emma."

"You haan' no understandin' for liberty, chil'. Seems ef 't was like religion"—

"Ef I wor to tell Mas'r Henry, oh, wouldn' you cotch it?"

"Go 'long!" cried Zoe, looking out for a missile. "Doan' ye bring no more o' yer rabbits here, ef ye'r' gwine to fetch an' carry"—

"Lors, Aunt Aoe, 'pears like you's out o' sorts. Haan' I got nof'n berrer to do dan be tellin' tales ob old women dat's a—waitin' for de Lord's salvation?" said Flor, with a twang of great gravity,—and proceeded thereat to make her exit in a series of lively somersaults through the room and over the threshold.

Aunt Zoe, who, ever since she had lost the use of her feet, had been a little wild on the subject of freedom, knew very well within that Flor would make no mischief for her; but, except for the excited state into which the news brought by some mysterious plantation runner had thrown her, she would scarcely have been so incautious. As it was, she had dropped a thought into Flor's head to ferment there and do its work. It was almost the first time in her life that the girl had heard freedom discussed as anything but a doubtful privilege. First awakening to consciousness in this state, it was with effort and only lately she had comprehended that there could be any other: a different condition from one in which Miss Emma was mistress and she was maid seemed at first preposterous, then fabulous, and still unnatural: nevertheless, there was a flavor of wicked pleasure in the thought. Flor looked with a sort of contempt on the little tumbling darkies who had never entertained it. Ever since she was born, however, she had frequently fancied she would like the liberty of rambling that the little wild creatures of the wood possess, but had felt criminal in the desire, and recently she had found herself enjoying the immunity of the mocking-bird on the bough, and was nearly as free in her going and coming as the same bird on the wing.

During the weeks that followed this conversation Flor's dances flagged. They existed, to be sure, but with an angularity that made them seem solutions of problems, rather than expressions of emotion; they were merely mechanical, for she had lost all interest in them. They became at last so listless as to exhibit, to more serious eyes, signs of grace in the girl. Flor wondered, if Zoe had spoken the truth, that nothing appeared changed on the plantation: all their own masters, why so obsequious to the driver still? This was one of the last of the great places; behind it, the small farms, with few hands, ran up the mountains; why was there no stampede of these unguarded slaves? She hardly understood. She listened outside the circle of the fire on the ground at night, where two or three old women mumbled together; she inferred, that, though no one of them would desert Mas'r Henry, they enjoyed the knowledge that they were at liberty to do so, if they wished. Flor laughed a bit at this, thinking where the poor things could possibly go, and how they could get there, if they would; but in her heart of hearts—though all the world but this one spot was a barren wilderness, and she never could desire to leave her dear Miss Emma, nor could find happiness away from her—it seemed a very pleasant thing to think that her devotion might be a voluntary affair, and she stayed because she chose. Still she was skeptical. The abstract question puzzled her a little, too. How came Mas'r Henry to be free? Because he was white; that explained itself. But Miss Emma—she was white, too and yet somehow she seemed to belong to Mas'r Henry. She wondered if Mas'r Henry could sell Miss Emma; and then the thought occurred, and with the thought the fear, that, possibly, some day, he might sell her, Flor herself, away from Miss Emma and all these pleasant scnes. After such a thought had once come, it did not go readily. Flor let it linger,—turned it over in her mind; gradually familiarized with its hurt, it seemed as if she had half said farewell to the place. Better far to be a runaway than to be sold. But if it came to that, whither should she run? what was this world beyond? who was there in this sad wide world to take care of a little black image? and if she waited for it to come to that, could she get away at all? It was no wonder that in the midst of such new and grave speculations the girl's dance grew languid and her sharp tongue

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still. The earth was just as beautiful as ever, the skies were as deep, the flowers as intense in tint, the evening air laden with jasmine—scents as delicious as of old; but in these few weeks Flor had reached another standpoint. It seemed as if a film had fallen from her eyes, and she saw a blight on every blossom.

It was about this time, spring being at its flush, that some passing guest mentioned the march of a regiment, the next day, from Cotesworth Court—House to the first railroad—station, on its way to the seat of war. The idea of the thing filled Miss Emma with enthusiasm. How they would look, so many together, in the beautiful gray uniform too, to any one standing on Longfer Hill! She longed to see the faces of men when they took their lives in their hand for a principle. She had practised the Bonny Blue Flag till there was nothing left of it; but if a band played it in the open air, with the rising and falling of the wind, and under waving banners and glittering guidons all the men with their pale faces and shining eyes went marching by—

The end of it was, that, as her father would never have listened to anything of the kind, Flor privately informed her of a short cut down the river—bank and round the edge of the swamp to the foot of Longfer Hill,—a walk they could easily take in a couple of hours. And as nobody was in the habit of missing Flor much, and her young mistress would be supposed, after her custom, to be spending half the day in naps, they accordingly took it. Nevertheless, it was an exceedingly secret affair, for Mas'r Henry had always strictly forbidden his daughter to leave his own grounds without fit escort.

This expedition seemed to Flor such a proud and gratifying confidence, that in her pleasure she forgot to think; she only danced round about her mistress, with a return of her old exuberance, till the more quiet path of the latter resembled a straight line surrounded by an arabesque of fantastic flourishes. But, in fact, the young patrician, unaccustomed to exertion, was well wearied before they reached the river—bank. They had yet the long border of the swamp to skirt, and there towered Longfer Hill. Why could they not go across, she wondered. They would sink, Flor answered her; and then the moccasins! But there were all those green hummocks,—skipping from one to another would be mere play,—and there were no moccasins for miles. And before Flor could gainsay her, she had sprung on, keeping steadily ahead, in a determination to have her own way; and with no other course left her, Flor followed, though, at every spring, alighting on the hummocks that Miss Emma had trodden, the water splashed up about her bare ankles, and her heart shook within her at the thought of fierce runaways haunting these inaccessible hollows, and the myths of the deeper district. Before long, she had overtaken her young mistress, and they paused a moment for parley. Miss Emma was convinced, that, if it were no worse than this, it would be delightful. Flor assured her that she did not know the way any longer, for their winding path between the tall cypresses veiled in their swinging tangles of funereal moss had confused her, and she could only guess at the direction of Longfer Hill. This, then, was an adventure, Miss Emma took the responsibility all upon herself, and plunged forward. Miss Emma must know best, of course, concerning everything. Nothing loth, and gayly, Flor plunged after.

The hummocks on which they went were light, spongy masses of greenery. Their footprints filled at once behind them with clear dark water; there were glistening little pools everywhere about them; the ground was so covered with mats of brilliant blossoms that what appeared solid for the foot was oftenest the most treacherous place of all; and at last they stayed to take breath, planting themselves on the trunk of a fallen tree so twisted and twined with variegated vines and flowers, and deadly, damp fungi, that it was like some gorgeous dais—seat. Behind them and beside them was the darkness of the cypress groves. Before them extended a smooth floor, a wide level region, carpeted in the most vivid verdure and sheeted with the sunshine, an immense bed of softest moss, underlaid with black bog, quaking at every step, and shaking a thousand diamonds into the light. Scarcely anything stirred through all the stretch; at some runnel along its nearer margin, where upon one side the more broken swamp recommenced, a rosy flamingo stood and fished, and, still remoter, the melancholy note of a bird tolled its refrain, answered by an echoing voice from some yet inner depth of forest far away. Save for this, the silence was as intense as the vastness and color of the scene, till it opened and resolved itself into one broad insect hum. The children took a couple of steps forward, under their feet the elastic sod sank and rose with a spurt of silver jets; they sprang back to their seats, and the shading tree above shook down a shining shower in rillets of silver rain. They remained for a minute, then, resting there. Singularly enough, Longfer Hill, which had previously been upon their left, now rose far away upon the right. When at length they comprehended its apparition, they looked at one another in complete bewilderment. Miss Emma began to cry; but Flor took it as only a fresh complication of this world, that was becoming for her feet a maze of intricacy.

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"We must go back," said Miss Emma, at last. "I'm sure, if I'd known—Of course we never can cross here. The very spoonbill wades. Oh, why didn't—Well, there's no blame to you, Floss. I've nobody to thank but myself; that's a comfort."

"Lors, Miss Emma, it's my fault altogeder. I shouldn' neber told ye. An' as for gwine back, it's jus' as bad as torrer."

"We can't stay here all night! Oh, I'm right tired out! If I could lie down"—

"'Twouldn' do no way, Miss Emma," answered Flor, in a fright for her friend, as a quick, poisonous-looking lizard slid along the log, like a streak of light, in the wake of a spider which was one blotch of scarlet venom.

Far ahead, the strong sun, piercing the marsh, drew up a vapor, that, blue as any distant haze in one part and lint-white in another, made itself aslant into low, delicious, broken prisms, melting all between. This, more than anything else, told extent of the bog before them, and, hot as it was now, betrayed the deathly chill lurking under such a coverlet at night. In every other direction lay the cypress jungle; and whether they saw the front or back of Longfer Hill, and on which side the river ran, steering for which they could steer for home, they had not the skill to say. Thus, what way to go they still were undecided, when, at something moving near them, they started to their feet in a faint terror, delaying only a single instant to gaze at it,—a serpent, that, coiled round the stem above, had previously seemed nothing but a splendid parasite, and that just lifted its hooded head crusted with gems, and flickered a long cleft tongue of flame over them, while loosening in great loops from its basking-place. They vouchsafed it no second look, but, with one leap over the log, through the black mire, and from clump to clump of moss, sped away,—if that could be called speed which was hindered at each moment by waylaying briars and entangling ropes of blossoming vines, by delays in threatening quagmires and bewilderments in thickets beset by clouds of insects, by trips and stumbles and falls and bruises, and many a pause for tears and complaints and ejaculations of despair.

Meanwhile the heat of the day was mitigated by thin clouds sliding over the sun and banking up the horizon, though the hot wind still blew sweetly and steadily from the open quarter of the sky.

"Oh, what has become of us?" cried Miss Emma at length, when the shadows began to thicken, and out of the impenetrable forest and morass about them they could detect no path.

"We's los' into de swamp, Miss Emma," answered Flor, in a kind of gloomy defiance of the worst of it,—"da's all."

"And here we shall die!" cried the other.

And she flung herself, face down, upon the floor.

Flor was beside her instantly, taking her head upon her knee. Her own heart was sinking like lead; but she plucked it up, and for the other's sake snapped her fingers at Fortune.

"Lors, Miss, dar's so many berries we caan' starve nowes. I's 'bout to build a fire soon's it's dark; dis yere's a dry spot, ye see now. an', bress you, dey'll be out after us afore mornin',—de whole farm—full."

"With the dogs!" cried Miss Emma. "Oh, Floss, that I should live for that! to be hunted in the swamp with dogs!"

Flor was silent a moment or two. The custom personally affected her for the first time; worse than the barbarity was the indignity.

"Day aren't trained to hunt for you, Miss Emma," she said, more gloomily than she had ever spoken before. "Dey knows de diff'unce 'tween de dark meat and de light."

And then she laughed, as if her words meant nothing.

"They never shall touch you, Flor, while I'm alive!" suddenly exclaimed Miss Emma, throwing her arms about her.

"Lors, Miss, how you talk!" cried Flor, and then broke into a gust of tears. "To t'ink ob you a-carin' so much for a little darcy, Miss!"—and she set up a loud howl of joyful sorrow.

"You're the best friend I've got!" answered Miss Emma, hugging her with renewed warmth. "I love you worlds better than Agatha! And I'll never let you leave me! Oh, Flor! what shall we do?"

Flor looked about her for reply, and then scrambled up a sycamore like a squirrel.

It was apparently an island in the swamp on which they were: for the earth, though damp, was firm beneath them; and there was a thick growth of various trees about, although most were draped to the ground in the long, dark tresses of Spanish moss, waving dismally to and fro, with a dull, heavy motion of grief. On every other side

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from that by which they had come it appeared to be inaccessible, surrounded as well as Flor could see, by glimmering sheets of water, which probably were too full of snags and broken stumps, still upright, for the navigation of boats by any hands but those thoroughly acquainted with their wide region of stagnant pools. This island was not, however, a small spot, but one that comprised a variety of surfaces, having not only marsh and upland within itself, but something that in the distance bore a fearful resemblance to a young patch of standing corn, a suspicion confirmed into certainty by a blue thread of smoke ascending a little way and falling again in a cloud. Once, upon seeing such a sight, Flor might have fallen to the ground herself,—this could be no less than the abode of those sad runaways, those mythical Goblins of the Swamp,—but it would have been because she had forgotten then that she was not one of the strong white race that reared her. Now, at this moment, she felt a thrill of kinship with these creatures, hunted for with bloodhounds, as she would be to-morrow, perhaps.

"May-be I'll not go back," said Flor.

She slipped down the tree, and went silently to work, heaping a bed of the hanging moss, less wet than the ground itself, for her young mistress. Miss Emma accepted it passively.

"Oh, it's like sleeping on hearse—curtains!" was all she said.

It was already evening, but growing darker with the clouds that went on piling their purple masses and awaiting their signal. Suddenly the sweet, soft breeze trembled and veered, there was a brief calm, and the wind had hauled round the other way. A silence of preparation, answered by a long, low note of thunder, and the war had begun in heaven.

Miss Emma buried her face in the moss. But Flor, secretly relishing a good thunder-gust, drew up her knees and sat with equanimity, like a little black judge of the clouds; for, in the moment's dull, indifferent mood, she felt prepared for either fate. It was long before the rain came; then it plunged, a brief downfall, as if a cloud had been ripped and emptied,—a suffocating terror of rain, teeming with more appalling intimations than anything else in the world. But the wind was a blind tornado. The boughs swung over them and swept them; the swamp-water was lifted, and gluts of it slapped in Flor's face. She saw, not far away, a great solitary cypress rearing its head, and bearing aloft a broad eagle's nest, hurriedly seized in the grasp of the gale, twisted, raised, and snapped like a straw. The child began to shudder strangely at the breath of this blast that cried with such clamor out of the black vaults above, this unknown and tremendous power beneath which she was nothing but a mote; she suffered an unexplained awe, as if this fearful wind were some supernatural assemblage of souls fleeting through space and making the earth tremble under their wild rush. All the while the heavy thunders charged on high in one unbroken roar, across whose base sharp bolts broke and burst perpetually; and with the outer world wrapped in quivering curtains of blue flame, now and then a shaft of fire lanced its straight spear down the dense darkness of the woods behind in ghastly illumination, and a responsive spire shot up in some burning bush that blackened almost as instantly. Flor fancied that the lightning was searching for her, a runaway herself, and the burning bush answered, like a sentinel, that here she was. She cowered at length and sought the protection of the blind earth, full of awe and quaking, till by—and-by the last discharge, muffled and ponderous, rolled away, and, save for a muttered growl in some far distant den, the world was still and dark again.

Flor spoke to her mistress, and found, that, utterly worn out with fatigue and fright and exhausted electricity, she was asleep. She then got up and wrung out the rain from portions of her own and Miss Emma's dress, and heaped fresh armfuls of moss upon the sleeper in an original attempt at the pack; then she proceeded to explore the neighborhood, to see if there were any exit in other directions from the terrors of the swamp.

Stars began to struggle through and confuse their rays with the ravelled edges of the clouds. She groped along from tree to tree, looking constantly behind her at the clear, light opening of sky beneath which Miss Emma lay.

Perhaps she had come farther than she knew; for all at once, in the dread stillness that nothing but the dripping dampness broke, a sound smote her like a pang. It was an innocent and simple sound enough, a man's voice, clear and sweet, though measured somewhat, and suppressed in volume, chanting a slow, sad hymn, that had yet a kind of rejoicing about it:—

"Oh, no longer bond in Egypt,
No longer bond in Egypt,
No longer bond in Egypt.
The Lord hath set him free!"

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It came from a hollow below her. Flor pushed aside the great, glistening leaves in silence, and looked tremblingly in. There were half-burnt brands on a broad stone, throwing out an uncertain red glimmer; there was an awning of plaited reeds reaching from bough to bough; there was an old man stretched upon the ground, and a stalwart man sitting beside him and chanting this song, as if it were a burial-service: for the old man was dead.

Flor began to tremble again, with that instinctive animal antipathy to death and dissolution. But in an instant a rekindling gleam of the embers, hardly quenched, shot over the singer's face. In the same instant Flor shook before the secret she had learned. Sarp was a runaway, to be sure; and runaways ate little girls, she knew. But Flor, having lately encouraged incredulity, could hardly find it in her heart to believe that the fact of having stolen himself could have so utterly changed the old nature of Sarp, the kind butler, who always had a pleasant word for her when others had a cuff. Yet should she hail him? Ah, no, never! But then—Miss Emma! Her young mistress would die of starvation and the damp.

"Sarp!" whispered Flor, huskily.

The man started and sprang to his feet, alert and ready, waiting for his unseen enemy,—then half relapsed, thinking it might be nothing but the twitter of a bird.

"It's me, Sarp."

Who that was did not seem so plain to Sarp; he darted his swift glance in her direction, then at one step parted the bushes and dragged her through, as if it were game that he had trapped.

"Oh, Sarp!" cried Flor, falling at his feet. "Doan' yer kill me now! I di'n' mean to ha' found yer. I's done los' in de swamp, wid"—

But Flor though better of that.

The man raised her, but still held her out at arm's length, while he listened for further sound behind her.

"Oh, jus' le' go, Sarp, an' I'll dance for you till I drap!" she cried.

"Is it a time for dancing," he replied, "and the earth open for burying?"

"Lors, Sarp!" cried Flor, shrinking from the shallow grave she had not seen, "how's I to know dat?"—and she gave herself safe distance.

"Help me yere, then," said he.

But Flor remained immovable, and Sarp was obliged to perform by himself the last offices for the old slave, who, living out his term of harassments and hungers, had grown gray and died in the swamps. He went at last and brought an armful of broken sweet-flowering boughs and spread them over the place.

"Free among the dead," he said; then turned to Flor, who, having long since seen daylight through the darkness of her fears, proceeded glibly and volubly to pour out her troubles, on his beckoning her away, and to demand the help she had refused to render.

"There's the boat," said Sarp, reflectively. "And the rain will float it 'most anywheres to-night. But—come so far and troo so much to go back?"

Flor flung up her face and held her head back proudly.

"Yes, Sash! Doan' s'pose I'd be stealin' Mas'r Henry's niggers?"

For, having meditated upon it an hour ago, she was able to repel the charge vigorously.

"Go'n' to stay a slave all your life?"

"All Miss Emma's life."

"And—afterwards"—

"Den I'll go back to de good brown earth wid her," said Flor, solving the problem promptly.—"I don' see de boat."

"Ah, she'll make as brown dust as you,—Miss Emma,—that's so! But the spirit, Lome!"

"Sperit?" said Flor, looking uneasily over her shoulder with her twinkling eyes.

"The part of you that doan' die, Lome."

"I haan' nof'n ter do wid dat; dat 'longs to dem as made it; none o' my lookout; dono nof'n 'bout it, an' doan' want ter hear nof'n about it!" said Flor; for, reasoning on the old adage of a bird in the hand being worth two in the bush, she thought it more important just at present to save her body than to save her soul, admitting that she had one, and felt haste to be of more behoof than metaphysics.

There was a moon up now, and Flor could see her companion's dark face above her, a mere mass of shade. [I]t

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did not reassure her any to remember that her own was just as black.

"Lome," said Sarp, setting his back against a tree like one determined to have attention, "never mind about the boat yet. You've heard Aunt Zoe say how't the grace of the Lord was free?"

"Yes, I's heerd her kerwhoopin'. I's in a hurry, Sarp!"

"But's how't the man that refuses to accept it, when it's set before him, is done reckoned a sinner?"

"S'pose I has?"—and in her impatience she began to dance outright.

"It's jus' so with the present hour," he continued, not giving her time to interpose about escape again. "You have liberty offered you. If you refuses, how can you answer for it when your spirit 'pears afore the Judge? You choose him, and you choose righteousness, you chooses the chance to make yourself white in the Lord's eyes,—your spirit, Lome. Refuse, and you take sin and chains and darkness; you gets to deserve the place where they hab their share of fire and brimstone."

"Take mine wid 'lasses," said Flor, who, though inwardly a trifle cowed, never meant to show it. "W'a' 's de use o' bodering' 'bout all dat ar, w'en dar's Miss Emma a—cotchin' her deff, an' I's jus' starved? Ef you's go'n' to help us, Sarp"—

"You don' know what chains means, chil'," said the imperturbable Sarp. "They're none the lighter because you can't see 'em. It a'n't jus' the power to sell your body and the work of your hands; it's the power to sell your soul! If Mas'r Henry hab de min',—ef Mas'r Henry have the mind, I say, to make you go wrong, can you help it while you's a slave?"

"'T aan' no fault o' mine ter be bad, ef I caan' help it. Come now," said Flor sullenly, seeing little hope of respite,— "should 'tink 't was de Ol' Sarpint hisself!"

"And 't aan' no virtue of yours to be good, ef you caan' help it; you'd jus' stay put—jus' between—in de brown earth, as you said. You'd never see that beautiful land beyond the grave wid the river of light flowing troo der place, an' the people singing songs before the great white t'rone."

"Tell me 'bout dat ar, Sarp," said Flor, forgetfully.

"Dey's all free there, Lome."

"How was dis dey got dere? Couldn' walk nowes, an' couldn' fly"—

"Haan' you seen into Miss Emma's prayer—book the angels with wings high and shining all from head to foot?"

"Yes," said Flor,— "Angels."

"And one of them you'll be, Lome, ef you jus' choose,—ef, for instance, you choose liberty to—day."

"Lors now, Sarp, I doan' b'lieb a word you say! Get out wid yer conundrums! Likely story, little black nigger like dis yere am be put into de groun' an' come out all so great an' wh'ite an' shinin'—like!"

"For God shall deliver my soul from the power of the grave.' 'Shall.'

That's a promise,—a promise in the Book Di'n't yer eber plant a bean, Lome,—little hard black bean? And did a little hard black bean come up? No, but two wings of leaves, and a white blossom jus' ready to fly itself, and so sweet you could smell it acrost de field. So they plant your body in the earth, Lome"—

"You go 'long, Sarp! Ef you plant beans, beans come up," said Flor, decisively.

This direct and positive confutation rather nonplussed Sarp, his theory not being able at once to assimilate his fact, and he himself feeling, that, if he pushed the comparison farther, he would reach some such atrocity as that, if the the white and shining flower produced in its season again the black bean from which it sprung, so the white and shining soul must once more clothe itself in the same sordid, unpurified body from which it first had sprung. He had a vague glimmer that perhaps his similie was too material, and that this very body was the clay in which the springing, germinating souls was planted to bloom out in heaven, but dared not pursue it unadvised, for fear of the quicksands into which it might betray him. He merely tied a knot in the thread of his discourse by answering,—

"Jus' so. The bean planted, the bean comes up. You planted, and what follows?"

"I come up," said Flor, consentingly, and quite as if he had got the better of the discussion.

Then he rose, and Flor led the way back to Miss Emma,—having first, upon Sarp's serious hesitation, pledged herself for Miss Emma's secrecy and gratitude with tears and asseverations.

In spite of the fact that he had never meant nor cared to see it again, there was something pleasant to Sarp in the face of the sleeper upturned in a moonbeam. He stooped and lifted her tenderly, and laid her head on his

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shoulder. The young girl opened her eyes vacantly, but heard Flor's voice beside her still,—

"Doan' ye be scaret now, honey! Bress you, 's a true frien': he'll get us shet of dis yere swamp mighty sudd'n!"

And soothed by the dreamy motion, entirely fatigued, borne swiftly along in strong arms, under the low, waving boughs in the dim forest darkness, she was drowsed again with slumber, from which she woke only on being placed in the bottom of a skiff to turn over into a deeper dream than before. Flor nodded triumphantly to her companion, in the beginning, keeping pace beside him with short runs,—there could be no fear of babble about that of which one knew nothing,—and took her seat at last in the boat as he directed, while with a long pole he pushed out into the deeper water away from the shadow of the shore, and then went steering between the japs and gnarls, that, half protruding from the dark expanses, seemed the heads of strange and preternatural monsters. Now and then a current carried them; now and then their boatman sculled, now and then in shallower places poled along; sometimes he rested, and in the intervals took occasion to continue his missionary labor upon Flor,—his first object being to convince her she had a soul, and his second that in bondage every chance to save that soul alive was against her. Then he drew slight pictures of a different way of things, such as had solaced his own imagination, rude, but happy idyls of freedom: the small house, one's own; the red light in the window, a guiding star for weary feet at night coming home to comfort and smiles and cheer; no dark, haunting fear of a hand to reach between one and those loved dearest; no more branding like cattle, manhood and womanhood acknowledged, met with help and welcome and kind hands, cringing no more, but standing erect, drinking God's free sunshine, and growing nearer heaven. How much or how little of all his dream poor Sarp realized, if ever he reached the land of his desire at all, Heaven only knows. But Flor listened to him as if he recited some delightful fairy-tale,—charming indeed, but all as improbable as though one were telling her that black was white. Then, too, there was another dream of Sarp's,—the dream of a whole race loosening itself from the clinging clod. Flor got a glimmer of his meaning,—only a glimmer; it made her heart beat faster, but it was so grand she liked the other best.

So, creeping through narrow creeks, now they skirted the edges of the long, low, flat morass,—now wound round the giant trunk of a fallen tree that nearly bridged the pool whose dark mantle they severed,—now pushed the boat's head up into a wall of weeds, that bent back and let it through the deep cut flooded by the rain, where the wild growth shut off everything but the high hollow of a luminous sky, with ribbon-grasses and long prickly leaves brushing across their faces from either side, here and there a sudden dwarf palmetto bristling all its bayonets against the peaceful night, and all the way singular uncouth shapes of vegetation, like conjurations of magic, cutting themselves out with minuteness upon the vast clear background so darkly and weirdly that the voyagers seemed to be sliding along the shores of some new, strange under-world,—now they got out, and, wading ankle-deep in plashy bog, drew the boat and its slumberer heavily after them,—now went slowly along, afloat again, on the broad lagoons, which the moon, from the deep far heaven, shot into silver reaches, and, with the trees, a phantom company of shadows, weeping in their veils along the farther shore, with all the quaint outlines of darkness, the gauzy wings that flitted by, the sweet, wild scents across whose lingering current they drifted, the broad silence disturbed only by the lazy wash of a seldom ripple, made their progress, through heavy gloom and vivid light, an enchanted journey.

At length they lifted overhanging branches, and glided out upon a sheet of open water, a little lake fed by natural springs; and here, paddling over to the outlet, a tide took them down a swift brook to the river. Sarp stemmed this tide, made the opposite bank of the brook, and paused.

"Have you chosen, Lome?" said he. "Will you go back with me, and so on to the Happy Land of Freedom? Not that I'll have my own liberty till I've earned it,—till I've won a country by fighting for it. But I'll see you safe; and if I'm spared, one day I'll come to you. Will you go?"

Flor hung back a moment. "I'd like to go, Sarp, right well," said she, twisting up the corner of her little tatter of an apron. "But dar am Miss Emma, you see."

"We can leave her on the bank here. She'll be all right when de day breaks, and fin' the house herself. There's as good as she without a roof this night."

"She's neber been use' to it. She wouldn' know a step o' de way. Oh, no, Sarp! I 'longs to Miss Emma; she couldn' do widout me. She'd jus' done cry her eyes out an' die,—'way here in de wood. No, Sarp, I mus' take her back. She's delicate, Miss Emma is. I'd like to go right well, Sarp,—'t a'n't much ob a 'sapp'ntment,—I's use' to 'em,—I'd like for to go wid you."

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Lingering, irresolute, she stood up in the swaying skiff, keeping her balance as if she were dancing; then, the motion, perhaps, throwing her back into her old identity, she sprang to the shore like a cat. Sarp laid Miss Emma beside her, and then shot away, back over all the desolate reaches and lonely shining pools; and Flor, with a little wail of despair, hid her face on the ground, that her weakened and bewildered little mistress might not see the flood of tears that wet the grass beneath it.

It was between two and three o'clock in the morning, when, chilled, draggled, and dripping wet, they reached the house. Lights were moving everywhere about it: no one had slept there that night. There was a great shout from high and low as the two forlorn little objects crept into the ray. Miss Emma was met with severe reproaches, afterwards with tears and embraces; and cordial drinks and hot flannels were made ready for her in a trice. As for Flor, she was warmed after another fashion,—being sent off for punishment; and, in spite of the implorations of Miss Emma and the interference of Miss Agatha, the order was executed. It was the first time she had ever received such reward of merit in form; and though it was a slight affair, after all, the hurt and wrong rankled for weeks, and, instead of the gay, dancing imp of former days, henceforth a silent, sullen shadow slipped about and haunted all the dark places of the house.

Mas'r Henry, being a native of Charleston, was also a gentleman of culture, and fond of the fine arts to some extent. Indeed, looking at it in a poetical view, the feudality of slavery, even more than the inevitable relation of property, was his strong tie to the institution. He had a contempt for modern progress so deeply at the root of his opinions that he was only half aware of it; and any impossible scheme to restore the political condition of what we call the Dark Ages, and retain the comforts of the present one, would have found in him a hearty advocate. One of his favorite books was a little green-covered volume, printed on coarse paper, and smelling of the sea which it had crossed: a book that seemed to bring one period of those past centuries up like a pageant,—so vividly, with all the flying dust of their struggle in the sunbeam before him, did its opulent vitality reproduce, in their splendors and their sins, the actual presences of those dead men and women, now more unreal substance than the dust of their shrouds. He like to carry this mediaeval Iliad round with him, and, taking it out at propitious places, go jotting his pencil down the page. He had heard it called an incomprehensible puzzle of poetry; it gave him pleasure, then, to unriddle and proclaim it plain as print. He was thus delectating himself one day, while Flor, still in her phase of moodiness, stood behind Miss Agatha's chair; and, the passage pleasing him, he read it aloud to Miss Agatha, whom, in the absence of his son, her husband, he was wont to consider his opponent in the abstract, however dear and precious in the concrete.

"As, shall I say, some Ethiop, past pursuit
Of all enslavers, dips a shackled foot,
Burnt to the blood, into the drowsy, black,
Enormous watercourse which guides him back
To his own tribe again, where he is king;
And laughs, because he guesses, numbering
The yellower poison-wattles on the pouch
Of the first lizard wrested from its couch
Under the slime, (whose skin, the while, he strips
To cure his nostril with, and festered lips,
And eyeballs bloodshot through the desert blast,)
That he has reached its boundary, at last
May breathe; thinks o'er enchantments of the South,
Sovereign to plague his enemies, their mouth,
Eyes, nails, and hair; but, these enchantments tried
In fancy, puts them soberly aside
For truth; projects a cool return with friends,
The likelihood of winning mere amends
Erelong; thinks that, takes comfort silently,
Then from the river's brink his wrongs and he,
Hugging revenge close to their hearts, are soon
Offstriding to the Mountains of the Moon."

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Flor stood listening, with eyes that shone strangely out of the gloom of her face.

"Well, child," said her master to Miss Agatha, "How does that little monodrame strike you? Which do you find preferable, tell me, Ashantee at home or Ashantee abroad? civilized or barbarized? the institution or the savage? Eh, Blossom," turning to Flor, "what do you think of the condition of that ancestor of yours?"

"Mas'r Henry," said Flor, gravely, "He was free."

"Eh? Free? What! are you bitten, too?"

And Mas'r Henry laughed at the thought, and pictured to himself his dancer dancing off altogether, like the swamp-fire she was. Then his tone changed.

"Flor," said he, sternly, "who has been talking to you lately? Do you know, Agatha? I have seen this for some time. I must learn what one among the hands it is that in these times dares breed disaffection."

"No one's talked to me, Sah," said Flor,— "no one onter der place."

"Some one off of it, then."

"Mas'r Henry, I's been havin' my own t'oughts. Mas'r knows I couldn' lebe Miss Emma nowes. Couldn' tief her property nowes. But ef Mas'r Henry 'd on'y jus' 'sider an' ask li' Missy for to make dis chil' a presen' ob myse'f"—

"So that's what it means?" and Mas'r Henry smiled a moment at the ludicrous idea presented to him.

"Flor," said he then, abruptly, "I have never heard the whole of that night in the swamp. It must be told."

"Lors, Sah! So long ago, I's done forgot it!"

"You may have till to-morrow morning to quicken your memory."

"Haan' nof'n' more to 'member, Mas'r."

"You heard me. You have your choice to repeat it either now or tomorrow morning."

"Couln' make suf'n', whar nof'n' was. Couldn' tink o' nof'n' all ter once. Couldn' tell nof'n' at all in a hurry," said Flor, with a twinkle. "Guess I'll take tell de mornin', anywes, Mas'r." And she was off.

And Mas'r Henry went back to his book, —the watcher nodding on his spear,—and all the stormy scenes he expected soon to realize in his own life, when the sword of conscription had numbered his old head with the others.

Flor went out from the presence defiant, as became a rebel.

Although that special mode of martyrdom was not proper to the plantation, and Flor felt in herself few particles of the stuff of which martyrs are made, she was determined, that, as to telling so much as that Sarp was still in the swamp, let alone betraying the way to his late habitat,—even were she able,—she never would do it, though burned at the stake. The determination had a dark look; nevertheless, two glimmers lighted it: one was the hope, in a mistrust of her own strength, that Sarp had already gone; the other was a perception that the best way to keep Sarp's secret was to make off with it. She began to question what authority Mas'r Henry had to demand this secret from her; she answered in her own mind, that he had no authority at all;—then she was doubly determined that he should not have it. She had heard talk of chivalry at table and among guests; she had half a comprehension of what it meant; she wondered if this were not a case in point,—if it were, after all, the color, and not the sex, that weighed. That aroused her indignation, aroused also a feeling of race: she would not have changed color that moment with the fairest Circassian of a harem, could the white slave have appeared in all the dazzle of her beauty,—Mas'r Henry had called that man, of whom he read aloud to-day, her ancestor. She knew what that was, for she had heard Miss Emma boast of her progenitors. But he was free; then it followed that she was not a slave by nature, only by vicious force of circumstance. Mas'r Henry had no right to her whatever; instead of her stealing herself, he was the thief who retained her against her will. What could be the name of the country where that man had lived? It was somewhere a long way from this place, down the river, perhaps beyond the sea;—there were others there, then, still, most likely. Flor had an idea that among them she might be a superior, possibly received with welcome, invested with honors;—she lingered over the pleasant vision. But how was one ever to find the spot? Ah, that book of Mas'r Henry's would tell, if she could but take it away to those kind people Sarp had told of. So she meditated awhile on the curious travels with Sordello for a guide-book, till old affections smote her for having thought of taking the thing, when "Mas'r Henry set so by it," and she put the vision aside, endeavoring to recall in its place all that Sarp had told her of the North. She realized then, personally, what a wide world it was. Why should she stay shut in this one point upon it all: a hill and the fir wood behind her; marshes on this side; woods again on the other; low hills far away before her; out of them all, the dark torrent of the river showing the

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swift way to freedom and the great sea? She drew in a full breath, as if close air oppressed her.—A bird flew over her then, high above her head, careering in fickle circles, and at length sailing down out of sight far into other heavens. Flor watched him bitterly; she comprehended Zoe's scorn of her past content;—if only she had wings to spread! But Sarp had told her, that, if she went away, she would one day have wings. None of Sarp's other arguments weighed a doit,—but wings to roam with over this beautiful world! The liberty of vagabondage! She watched the clouds chasing one another through the sunny heaven, watched their shadows chasing along the fields and hills below; her heart burned that everything in the world should be more free than she herself. She felt the wind fanning over her on its way, she took the rich odors that it brought, she looked after the flower-petal that fluttered away with it, she saw the strong sunshine penetrating among the shadows of a jungly spot and catching a thousand points of color in the gloom, she recognized the constant fluent interchange among all the atoms of the universe;—why was she alone, capable of flight, chained to one spot?—She gazed around her at the squalor and the want, the brutish shapes and faces, her own no better, at the narrow huts; thought of the dull routine of work never to enrich herself, the possibility of purchase and cruelty; —she sprung to her feet, all her blood boiling; it seemed out of the question for her to endure it another moment.—Mas'r Henry had told her once that he could make his fortune with her dancing, if he chose; she stood as much in need of a fortune as Mas'r Henry,—why not make it for herself? why not be off and away, her own mistress, earning and eating her own bread, sending some day for Zoe, finding Sarp in those far-off happy latitudes?—It occurred to her, like a discovery of her own, that, doing the work she was bidden, taking the food she was given, whipped at will, and bought and sold, she was no better than one among the cattle of the place;—the sudden sense of degradation made even her dark cheek burn. She laid a hand down on the earth, her great Teraph, to see if it were possible it could still be warm and such a wrong done to her its child. Then, all at once, she understood that wood and river were open to her fugitive feet, and if she stayed longer in slavery, it was the fault of no one but herself.—She stood up, for some one called her; she obeyed the call with alacrity, for she found it in her power to do so or not as she chose. She felt taller as she stepped along, and held up her head with the dignity of personality. She acknowledged, perhaps, that she was no equal of Miss Emma's,—that the creative hand, making its first essay on her, rounded its complete work in Miss Emma; but she declared herself now no mere offshoot of the sod,—she was a human being, a being of beating pulses and affections, and something within her, stifled here, longing to soar and away.

It was dark before Flor had ceased her novel course of thinking, pursued through all her little tasks,—beautiful star-lighted dark, full of broken breezes, soft and warm, and loaded with passionate spices and flower-breaths; she was alone again, under the shadows of the trees, entirely surrendered to her whirling fancies. In these few hours she had lived to the effect of years. She was neither hungry nor tired; she was conscious of but a single thing,—her whole being seemed effervescing into one wild longing after liberty. It was not that she could no longer brook control and be at the beck of each; it was a natural instinct, awakened at last in all the strength of maturity, that would not let her breathe another breath in peace unless it were her own,—that made her feel as though her chains were chafing into the bone,—that taught her the unutterable vileness and loathliness of bonds,—that convicted her, in being a slave, of being something foul upon the fair face of creation. She sat casting about for ways of escape. It was absurd to think she could again blunder on that secure retreat of the swamp before being overtaken; no boats ever passed along down the foaming river; if she were some little mole to hide and burrow in the ground till danger were over,—but no, she would rather front fear and ruin than lose one iota of her newly recognized identity. But there was no other path of safety; she clutched the ground with both hands in her powerlessness; in all the heaven and earth there seemed to be nothing to help her.

So at last Flor rose; since she could not get away, she must stay; as for the next day's punishment, she could laugh at it,—it was not its weight, but its wickedness, that troubled her; but escape, some time, she would. Lying in wait for method, ambushed for opportunity, it would go hard, if all failed. Of what value would life be then? she could but throw that after. So at some time, that was certain, she would go,—when, it was idle to say; it might be years before affairs were more propitious than now,—but then, at last, one day, the place that had known her should know her no more. Nevertheless, despite all this will and resolution, the heart of the child had sunk like a plummet at thought of leaving everything, at fear of future fortune; this deferring, after all, was half like respite.

Flor drew near the out-door fire, where Zoe and one or two others busied themselves. Something excited them extremely, it was plain to see and hear. Flor, beyond the circle of the light, strained her ears to listen. It was only a crumb of comfort that she obtained, but one of those miraculous crumbs to which there are twelve baskets

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of fragments: the Linkum gunboats were down at the mouth of the river. Oh! heaven a boat's length off! A day and night's drifting and rowing; then climbing the side slaves, treading the deck freemen,—the shackles fallen, the hands loosened, the soul saved!

But the boat? There was not such a thing along these banks. Improvise one. That was not possible. Flor listened, and the wild gasps of hope died out again into the dulness of despair. Some other time,—not this. As she stood still, idly and hopelessly hearkening to the mutter of the old women, with the patches of flickering firelight falling on their faces in strange play and revelation, there stole upon her ear a sweeter and distincter sound, the voice of Miss Agatha, as, leaning out upon the night, she sang a plaint that consorted with her melancholy mood, learned in her Northern home in happier hours, without a thought of the moment of misery that might make it real.

Sooner or later the storms shall beat
Over my slumber from head to feet;
Sooner or later the winds shall rave
In the long grass above my grave.

I shall not heed them where I lie,
Nothing their sound shall signify,
Nothing the headstone's fret of rain,
Nothing to me the dark day's pain.

Sooner or later the sun shall shine
With tender warmth on that mound of mine;
Sooner or later, in summer air,
Clover and violet blossom there.

I shall not feel in that deep-laid rest
The sheeted light fall over my breast,
Nor ever note in those hidden hours
The wind-blown breath of the tossing flowers.

Sooner or later the stainless snows
Shall add their hush to my mute repose;
Sooner or later shall slant and shift
And heap my bed with their dazzling drift.

Chill though that frozen pall shall seem,
Its touch no colder can make the dream
That recks not the sweet and sacred dread
Shrouding the city of the dead.

Sooner or later the bee shall come
And fill the noon with his golden hum;
Sooner or later on half-paused wing
The blue-bird's warble about me ring,—

Ring and chirrup and whistle with glee,
Nothing his music means to me,
None of these beautiful things shall know
How soundly their lover sleeps below.

Sooner or later, far out in the night,
The stars shall over me wing their flight;
Sooner or later my darkling dews
Catch the white spark in their silent ooze.

Never a ray shall part the gloom
That wraps me round in the kindly tomb;
Peace shall be perfect for lip and brow

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Sooner or later,—oh, why not now?

Little of this wobegone song touched Flor even enough to let her know there was some one in the world more wretched than herself. The last word, the last phrase, rang in her ears like a command,—now, why not now?—waiting for times and chances, hesitating, delaying, since go she must,—then why not now? What more did she need than a board and two sticks? Here they were in plenty. And with that, a bright thought, a fortunate memory,—the old abandoned scow! And if, after all, she failed, and went to watery death, did not the singer tell in how little time all would be quiet and oblivious once again? Oh, why not now?

Perhaps Flor would never have been entirely subjected to this state of mind but for an injury that she had suffered. Miss Emma had been rendered ill by the night's exposure in the swamp. In consequence of her complicity in this crime, Flor had been excluded from her young mistress's room during her indisposition, and ever since had not only been deprived of her companionship, but had not even been allowed to look upon her from a distance. A single week of that made life a desert. Too proud to complain, Flor saw in this the future, and so recognized, it may be, that it would be easy to part from the place, having already parted with Miss Emma. She drew nearer to the group now, and stood there long, while they wondered at her, gazing into the fire, her head fallen upon her breast. There was only one thing more to do: her little squirrel; nothing but her front of battle had kept it safe this many a day; were she once gone, it would be at the mercy of the first gridiron. Nobody saw the tears, in the dark and the distance, fast falling over the tiny sacrifice; but the cook might have guessed at them, when Flor brought her last offering, and begged that it might be prepared and taken in to Miss Emma.

How many things there were to do that evening! One wanted water, and another wanted towels, and a third wanted everything there was to want. Last of all, little Pluto came running with his unkindled torch,—Mas'r Henry wanted dancing.

Flor rummaged for her castanets, her tambourine, her ankle-rings,—they had all been thrown hither and thither,—and at length, as Pluto's torch flared up, ran tinkling along the turf, into the glow; and her voice broke, as she danced, into high, clear singing, triumphant singing, that welled up to the very sky, and made the air echo with sweetness. As she sang, all her slender form swayed to the tune, posturing, gesturing, bending now, now almost soaring, while, falling in showers of twinkling steps, her fleet feet seemed to weave their way on air. What ailed the girl? all asked;—such a play of emotion of mingled sorrow and ecstasy, never before had been interpreted by measure; so a disembodied spirit might have danced, and her dusky hue, the strange glancing lights thrown upon her here and there by the torch, going and coming and glittering at pleasure, made her appear like a shadow disporting before them. At length and slowly, note by note, with wild lingering turns to which the movement languished, her tone fell from its lofty jubilation to a happy flutelike humming; she waved her arms in the mimic tenderness of repeated and passionate farewells; then, still humming, faint and low and sweet, tripped off again, through the glow, along the turf, into the shadow, and out of sight; and it seemed to the beholders as if a fountain of gladness had gushed from the sod, and, playing in the light a moment, had run away down to join the river and the breaking sea.

Mas'r Henry called after Flor to throw her a penny; but she failed to reappear, and he tossed it to Pluto instead, and forgot about her.

So, bailed out and stuffed with marsh-grass in its crazy cracks, the old scow was afloat, the rope was cut, and by midnight it went drifting down the river. Waist-deep in shoal water, it appropriator had dragged it round inside the channel's ledge of rocks, with their foam and commotion, to the somewhat more placid flow below, and now it shot away over the smooth, slippery surface of the stream, that gave back reflections of the starbeams like a polished mirror. Terrified by the course along the rapid river, the little creature crouched in the bottom of the scow, now breathless as it sped along the slope, now catching at the edge as in some chance eddy or flow it swirled from side to side, or, spinning quite round, went down the other way. But by—and—by gathering courage, she took her station, kneeling where with the long poles, previously provided, she could best direct her galley and avoid the dangers of a castaway. Peering this way and that through the darkness, carried along without labor, spying countless dangers where none existed, passing safely by them all, coming into a strange region of the river, she began to feel the exhilaration of venturous voyagers close upon unknow shores; the rush of the river and the rustle of the forest were all the sound she heard; she was speeding alone through the darks of space to find another

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world. But, with time, a more material sensation called her back,—her feet were wet. What if the scow should founder! She flew to the old sun-dried gourd, and bailed away again till her arms were tired. When she dared leave the gourd, she was more calmly floating along and piercing an avenue of mighty gloom; the river-banks had reared themselves two walls of stone, and over them a hanging forest showed the heavens only like a scarf of stars caught upon its tree-tops and shaking in the wind. The deep loneliness made Flor tremble; the water that upbuoyed her was blackness itself; the way before her was impenetrable; far up above her opened that rent of sky,—so far, that she, a little dark waif among such tremendous shadows, was all unguessed by any guardian eye.

But not for heaven itself bodily before her would she have turned about, she who was all but free. The thought of that rose in her heart like strong wings beating onward;—feverishly she followed.

Flor perceived now that the old scow was being borne along with a strong, steady motion, unlike its first fitful drift; it brought her heart to her throat,—for just so, it seemed to her, would a torrent set that was hastening to plunge over the side of the earth. She remembered, with a start of cold horror, Zoe's dim tradition of a fall far off in the river. She had never seen one, but Zoe had stamped its terrors deeply. Still down in the gloom itself she could see nothing but the slowly lightening sky overhead, the drowning stars, the rosy flush upon the dark old tips feathering against a dewy grayness that was like powdered light. But gradually she heard what conquered all necessity of seeing,—heard a continuous murmurous sound that filled all the air and grew to be a sullen roar. It seemed like the dread murmur from the world beyond the grave, the roar in earthly ears of that awful silence. Flor's quick senses were not long at fault. She seized her poles, and with all her might endeavored to push in towards the side and out of the main channel. Straws would have availed nearly as much; far faster than she went in shore she drove down stream. It was getting to be morning twilight all below; a soft, damp wind was blowing in her face; in the distance she could see, like the changing outline of a phantom, a low cloud of mist, wavering now on this side, now on that, but forever rising and falling and hovering before her. She knew what it was. If she could only bring her boat to that bank,—precipice though it was,—there must be some broken piece to catch by! She toiled with all her puny strength, and the great stream laughed at her and roared on. Suddenly, what her wildest efforts failed to do, the river did itself,—dividing into twenty currents for its plunge, some one of the eddies caught the old scow in its teeth and sent it whirling along the inmost current of all, close upon the shore. The rock, whose cleft the river had primevally chosen, was here more broken than above; various edges protruded maddeningly as Flor skimmed by almost within reach. Twice she plucked at them and missed. One flat shelf, over which the thin water slipped like sheet of molten glass, remained and caught her eye; she was no longer cold or stiff with terror, but frantic to save herself; it was the only chance, the last; shooting by, she sprang forward, pole in hand, touched it, fell, caught a ledge with her hands while the fierce flow of the water lifted her off her feet, scrambled up breathlessly and was safe, while the scow swept past, two flashing furlongs, poised a few moments after on the brink of the fall, went majestically over, and came up to the surface below in pieces.

Flor wrung her hands in dismay. She had not understood her situation before. There was no escape now, it seemed,—not even to return. Nothing was possible save starving to death on this ledge,—and after that, the vultures. She sat there for a little while in a kind of stupor. She saw the light falling slowly down, as it had fallen millions of mornings before, and bringing out, all blue and purple shadows on the wet old rock; she saw the current ever hurrying by to join the tumult of the cataract; she heard the deep, sweet music of the waters like a noisy dream in her ears. With the shock of her wreck coming at the instant when she fancied herself so swiftly and securely speeding on towards safety and freedom, she felt indifferent to all succeeding fate. What if she did die? who was she? what was she? nothing but an atom. What odds, after all? The solution of her soliloquy was, that, before the first ray of sunshine reached down and smote the dark torrent into glancing emerald, she began to feel ravenously hungry, and found it a great deal of odds, after all. She rose to her feet, grasping cautiously at the slippery rock, and searched about her. There was another ledge close at hand, corresponding to the one on which she stood; she crept forward and transferred herself, with an infinitude of tremors, from this to that; there was a footfold just beyond; she gained it. Up and down and all along there were other projections, just enough for a hand, a foot: a wet and terrible pathway; to follow it might be death, to neglect it certainly was. What had she danced for all her days, if it had not made her sure and nimble footed? Under her the foam leaped up, the spectral mist crept like an icy breath, the spray sprinkled all about her, swinging herself along from ledge to ledge, from jap to jap, like a spider on a viewless thread. Now she hung just above the fall, looking down and longing to leap, with nothing but a shining laurel-branch between her and the boiling pits below; now, at last, a green hillside

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sloped to the water's edge, sparkling across all its solitude with ten thousand drops of dew, a broad, blue morning heaven bent and shone overhead, and having raced the river in the moment's light-heartedness of glee at her good hap, she sat some rods below, looking up at the fall and dipping her bleeding and blistered feet in and out of the cool and rapid-running river.

What was there now to do? To go back,—to go back,—not if she were torn by lions! That was as impossible for her as to reverse a fiat of creation. God had said to her,—"Let there be light." How could she, then, return to darkness? To keep along on land,—it might be weeks before she reached the quarter of the gunboats,—she would be seized as a stray, and lodged in jail, and sold for whom it might concern. But with her scow gone to pieces, what other thing was there to do? So she sat looking up at the spurting cascades, with their horns of silver leaping into the light, and all the clear brown and beryl rush of their crystalline waters, and longing for her scow. If she had so much as the bit of bark on which the squirrels crossed the river! She looked again about her for relief. The rainbow at the foot of all the falls, in its luminous, steady arch, seemed a bridge solid enough for even her little black feet, had one side of the stream been any surer haven than the other; and as she sought out its bases, her eye lighted on something curiously like a weed swaying up and down. She picked her way to it, and found it wedged where she could loosen it,—two planks still nailed to a stout crossbar.

She floated it, and held it fast a moment. what if she trusted to it,—with neither sail nor rudder, as before, but now with neither oar nor pole? On shore, for her there were only ravening wolves; waterfalls were no worse than they, and perhaps there were no more waterfalls. She stepped gingerly upon the fragment, seated and balanced herself, paddled with her two hands, and thought to slip away. In spite of everything, a kind of exultation bubbled up within her,—she felt as if she were defying Destiny itself.

When, however, Flor intrusted herself to the stream, the stream received the trust and seemed inclined to keep it; for there she stayed: the planks tilted up and down, the water washed over her, but there were the falls at nearly the same distance as when she embarked, and there they stayed as well. The water, too, was no more fresh and sweet, but had a salt and brackish taste. The sun was nearly overhead, and she was in an agony of apprehension before she saw the falls slide slowly back, and in one of a fresh succession of wonders, understanding nothing of it, she found herself, with a strange sucking heave under her, falling on the ebb-tide as before she had fallen on the mountain-current.

Gentle undulations of friendly hills seemed now to creep by; and through their openings she caught glimpses of cotton-fields. 'Twas a wicked relish in her thoughts, as she pictured the dusky laborers at work there, and she gliding by unseen in the idle sunshine. She passed again between high banks of red earth, scored by land-slides, with springs oozing out half-way up, and now and then clad in a mantle of vivid growth and color,—a thicket of blossoming pomegranate darkening on a sunburst of creamy dogwood, or a wild fig-tree sending its roots down to drink, with a sweet-scented and gorgeous epiphyte weaving a flowery enchantment about them, and making the whole atmosphere reel with richness. But all this verdant beauty, the lush luxuriance of grape-vines, of dark myrtle-masses, of swinging curtains of convolvuli almost brushing her head as she floated by,—nothing of this was new to Flor, nothing precious; she could have given all the beauty of earth and heaven for a crust of bread just then. She thought of the plantation with a dry sob, but would not turn her face. She could not move much, indeed, her position was so ticklish; hardy wretch as she was, she had already become faint and famished: she contrived, resting her arms on the crossbar, at last, to lay her head upon them; and thus lying, perpetually bathed by the soft, warm dip and rise of the water, the pain of hunger left her, and she saw the world waft by like a dream.

Slowly the evening began to fall. Flor marked the bright waters dim and put on a bloomy [gloomy?] purple along which rosy and golden shadows wandered and mingled, stars looked timidly up from beneath her, and just over her shoulder, as if all the daylight left had gathered in that one little carved line, lay the suspicion of the tenderest new moon, like some boatman of the skies essaying to encourage her with his apparition as he floated lightly down the west. Flor paid heed to the spectacle in its splendid quiet but briefly; her eyes were fixed on a great trail of passion-flowers that blew out a gale of sweetness from their broad blue disks. She had reached that hanging branch, lavishly blossoming here on the wilderness, and had hung upon the tide beneath it for a while, till she found herself gently moving back again; and now she swung slightly to and fro, neither making nor losing headway, and, fond of such sensuous delights, half content to lie thus and do nothing but breathe the delicious odor stealing towards her, and resting in broad airy swaths, it seemed, upon the bosom of the stream around her.

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By—and—by, when the great blue star, that last night at the zenith seemed to suspend all the tented drapery of the sky, hung there large and lovely again, Flor, gazing up at it with a confused sense of passion—flowers in heaven, half woke to find herself sliding down stream at last in earnest. Her brain was very light and giddy; all her powers of perception were momentarily heightened; she took notice of her seesawing upon the ebb and flow, and understood that washing up and down the shores, a mere piece of driftwood, life would long have left her ere she attained the river's mouth, if she were not stranded by the way. The branch of a cedar—tree came dallying by with that, brought down from above the falls; she half rose, and caught at it, and fell back, but she kept hold of it by just a twig, and,, fatigued with the exertion, drowsed away awhile. Waking again, after a little, her fingers still fast upon it, she drew it over, fixed it upright as she could, and spread her petticoat about it at the risk of utter capsizing. The soft sweet wind beat against the sail as happily as if it had been Cleopatra's weft of purple silk, and carried her on, while she lay back, one arm around her jury—mast, and half indifferently unconscious again. She had meant, on reaching the gunboats,—ah, inconceivable bliss!—to win her way with her feet; with willowy graces and eloquent pantomime, to have danced along the deck and into favor trippingly: now, if she should have strength enough left to fall on her knees, it would be strange. She clung to the crossbar in a little while from blind habit; the rest of her body seemed light and powerless. She was neither asleep nor awake now, suffering nothing save occasionally a wild flutter of hope which was joy and anguish together; but all things began mingling in her mind in a species of delirium while she gave them attention, afterwards slid by blank of all meaning but beauty. The lofty cypresses on the edge above loomed into obelisks, and stood like shafts of ebony against a glow of sunrise that stirred down deep in the night; dew—clouds, it seemed, hung on them, and lifted and lowered when their veils of moss waved here and there; the glistening laurel—leaves shivered in a network of light and shade like imprisoned spirits troubling to be free; but where the great magnolias stood were massed the white wings of angels fanning forth fragrances untold and heavenly, and one by one slowly revealing themselves in the dawn of another day. It seemed as if great and awful spirits must be leading this little being into light and freedom.

So the river lapsed along, and the sun blazed, and a torture of thirst came and went as it had come and gone before; and sometimes swiftly, sometimes slowly, the veering winds and the pendulous tides carried the wreck and its burden along. Flor had planned, before she started, that all her progress should be made by night; by day she would haul up among the tall rushes or under the lee of some stump or rock, and so escape strange sail and spying eyes. But there had been no need of this, for no other boat had passed up or down the river since she sailed. If there had, she could no more have feared it. She stole by a high deserted garden, the paling broken half away. A tardy almond—tree was stirring its tower of bloom in the sunshine up there; oranges were reddening on an overhanging bough, whose wreaths of snowy sweetness made the air a passionate delight; a luscious fruit dropped, with all its royal gloss, into the river beside her, and she could not put out a hand to catch it. She saw now all that passed but no longer with any afterthoughts of reference to herself; so sights might slip across the retina of a dead man's eye; her identity seemed fading from her, as from some substance on the point of dissolution into the wide universe. She felt like one who, under an aesthetic influence, seems to himself careering through mid—air, conscious only of motion and vanishing forms. Cultured uplands and thick woods peopled with melodies all stole by, mere picture; the long snake of the river crept through green meadowy shores haunted by the cluck and clutter of the marsh—hen; from a bluff of the bank broke a blaze of fire and a yelping roar, and something slapped and skipped along with water,—a ball from a Rebel battery to bring the strange craft to,—others followed and danced like demons through the hissing tide that rocked under her and plunged up and down, tilting and turning and half drowning the wreck. Flor looked at them all with wide eyes, at the battery and at the bluff, and went by without any more sensation than that dazed quiet in which, at the time, she would have gone down to death with the soft waters laying their warm weight on her head, not even thanking Fortune that in giving her a slippery plank gave her something to elude either canister or catapult. Occasionally she felt a pain, a strange parched pain; it burned awhile, and left her once more oblivious. She slept a little, by fits and starts; sometimes the very stillness stirred her. She listened and heard the turtle plumping down into the stream, now and then the little fishes leaping and plashing, the eels slipping in and out among the reeds and sedges at the side; far away in the broad marshes, that, bathed in dim vapor, now lay all about her, the cry of a bittern boomed; she saw a pair of herons flapping inland over the gray swell of the water; there were some great purple phantoms, darkly imagined monsters, looming near at hand:—all the phantasmagoria drifted by,—and then, caught in the currents playing forever by noon or night round the low edges of sand—bars and islets, she was sweeping out to sea like

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chaff.

The sun was going down, a mere redness in the curdling fleecy haze; the weltering seas rose and fell in broad sheets of burnished silver, the monotone of their music followed them, a cool salt wind blew over them and freshened them for storm. Flor rose on her arm and looked back,—the breeze roused her; pain and fear and hope rose with her and looked back too. Eager, feverish, fierce, recollecting and desiring and imprecating, her dry lips parted for a shriek that the dryer throat had at first no power to utter. In such wild longing pangs it seemed her heart would burst as it beat. The low land, the great gunboats, all were receding, and she was washing out to sea, a weed.—Well, then, wash!

The stem of the boat rose lightly, riding over the rollers; the sturdy arms kept flashing stroke; the great gulfs gaped for a life, no matter whose; night would darken down on them soon;—pull with a will!

They hear her voice as they drew near: she had found it again, singing, as the swan sings his death-song, loud and clear,—singing to herself some song of her old happy dancing-days, while the spray powdered over her and one broad wave lifted and tossed her on to the next,—no note of sorrow in the song, and no regret.

It was but brief delay beside her; then they pulled back, the wind piping behind them,—nearer to that purple cloud with its black plume of smoke, up the side and over; all the white faces crowding round her, pallid blots; one dark face smiling on her like Sarp's; friendship and succor everywhere about her; and over her, blowing out broadly upon the stormy wind, that flag whose starry shadow nowhere shelters a slave.