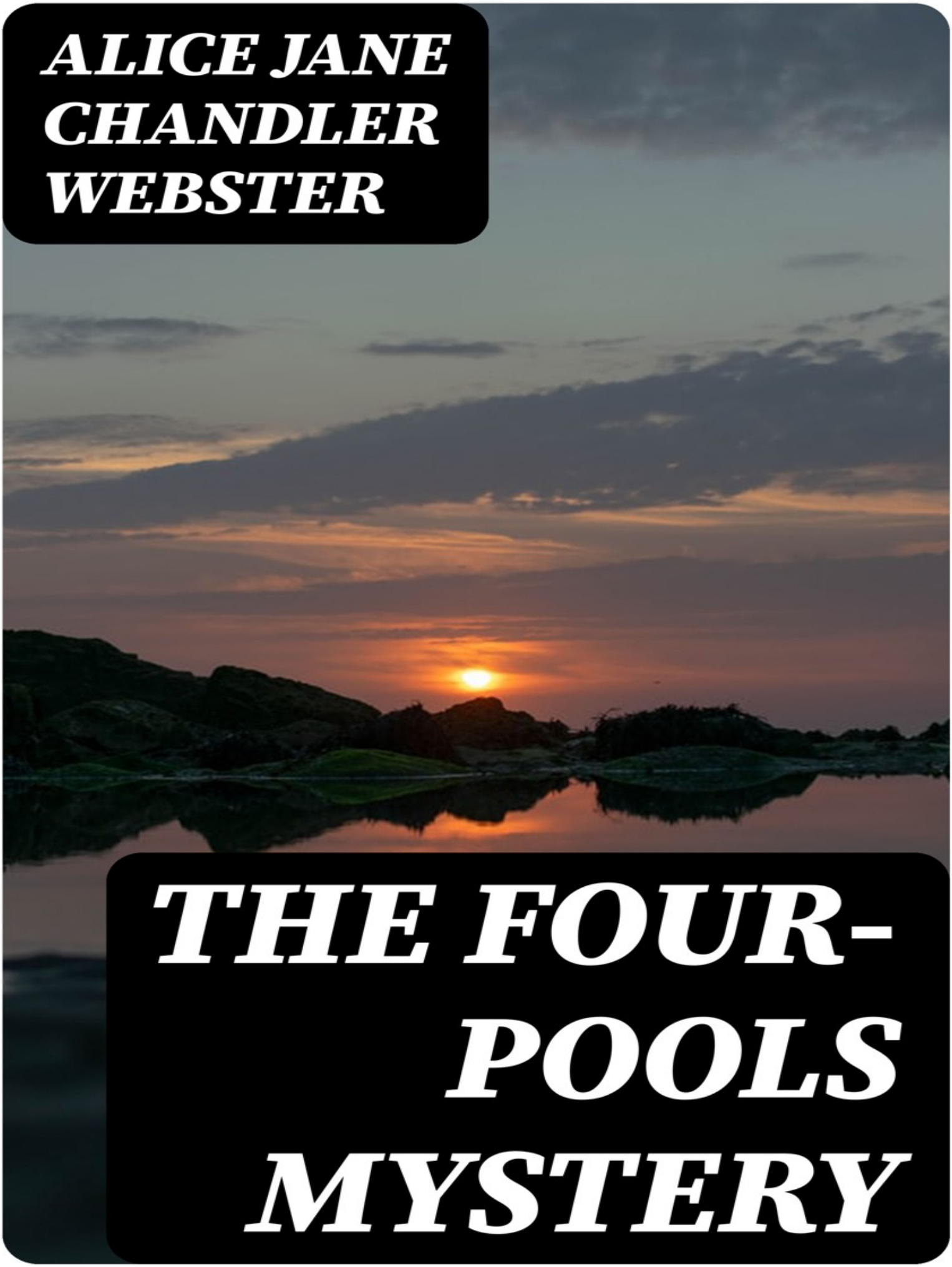
ALICE JANE CHANDLER WEBSTER
THE FOUR-POOLS MYSTERY

Alice Jane Chandler Webster

The Four-Pools Mystery

EAN 8596547184621

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

INTRODUCING TERRY PATTEN

Table of Contents

It was through the Patterson-Pratt forgery case that I first made the acquaintance of Terry Patten, and at the time I should have been more than willing to forego the pleasure.

Our firm rarely dealt with criminal cases, but the Patterson family were long standing clients, and they naturally turned to us when the trouble came. Ordinarily, so important a matter would have been put in the hands of one of the older men, but it happened that I was the one who had drawn up the will for Patterson Senior the night before his suicide, therefore the brunt of the work devolved upon me. The most unpleasant part of the whole affair was the notoriety. Could we have kept it from the papers, it would not have been so bad, but that was a physical impossibility; Terry Patten was on our track, and within a week he had brought down upon us every newspaper in New York.

The first I ever heard of Terry, a card was sent in bearing the inscription, "Mr. Terence K. Patten," and in the lower left-hand corner, "of the Post-Dispatch." I shuddered as I read it. The Post-Dispatch was at that time the yellowest of the yellow journals. While I was still shuddering, Terry walked in through the door the office boy had inadvertently left open.

He nodded a friendly good morning, helped himself to a chair, tossed his hat and gloves upon the table, crossed his legs comfortably, and looked me over. I returned the

scrutiny with interest while I was mentally framing a polite formula for getting rid of him without giving rise to any ill feeling. I had no desire to annoy unnecessarily any of the Post-Dispatch's young men.

At first sight my caller did not strike me as unlike a dozen other reporters. His face was the face one feels he has a right to expect of a newspaper man—keen, alert, humorous; on the look-out for opportunities. But with a second glance I commenced to feel interested. I wondered where he had come from and what he had done in the past. His features were undeniably Irish; but that which chiefly awakened my curiosity, was his expression. It was not only wide-awake and intelligent; it was something more. "Knowing" one would say. It carried with it the mark of experience, the indelible stamp of the street. He was a man who has had no childhood, whose education commenced from the cradle.

I did not arrive at all of these conclusions at once, however, for he had finished his inspection before I had fairly started mine. Apparently he found me satisfactory. The smile which had been lurking about the corners of his mouth broadened to a grin, and I commenced wondering uncomfortably what there was funny about my appearance. Then suddenly he leaned forward and began talking in a quick, eager way, that required all my attention to keep abreast of him. After a short preamble in which he set forth his view of the Patterson-Pratt case—and a clearsighted view it was—he commenced asking questions. They were such amazingly impudent questions that they nearly took my breath away. But he asked them in a manner so engagingly innocent that I found myself answering them

before I was aware of it. There was a confiding air of *bonne camaraderie* about the fellow which completely put one off one's guard.

At the end of fifteen minutes he was on the inside track of most of my affairs, and was giving me advice through a kindly desire to keep me from getting things in a mess. The situation would have struck me as ludicrous had I stopped to think of it; but it is a fact I have noted since, that, with Terry, one does not appreciate situations until it is too late.

When he had got from me as much information as I possessed, he shook hands cordially, said he was happy to have made my acquaintance, and would try to drop in again some day. After he had gone, and I had had time to review our conversation, I began to grow hot over the matter. I grew hotter still when I read his report in the paper the next morning. I could not understand why I had not kicked him out at first sight, and I sincerely hoped that he would drop in again, that I might avail myself of the opportunity.

He did drop in, and I received him with the utmost cordiality. There was something entirely disarming about Terry's impudence. And so it went. He continued to comment upon the case in the most sensational manner possible, and I railed against him and forgave him with unvarying regularity. In the end we came to be quite friendly over the affair. I found him diverting at a time when I was in need of diversion, though just what attraction he found in me, I have never been able to fathom. It was certainly not that he saw a future source of "stories," for he frankly regarded corporation law as a pursuit devoid of interest.

Criminal law was the one branch of the profession for which he felt any respect.

We frequently had lunch together; or breakfast, in his case. His day commenced about noon and lasted till three in the morning. "Well, Terry, what's the news at the morgue today?" I would inquire as we settled ourselves at the table. And Terry would rattle off the details of the latest murder mystery with a cheerfully matter-of-fact air that would have been disgusting had it not been so funny.

It was at this time that I learned his history prior to the days of the Post-Dispatch. He was entirely frank about himself, and if one half of his stories were true, he has achieved some amazing adventures. I strongly suspected at times that the reporting instinct got ahead of the facts, and that he embroidered incidents as he went along.

His father, Terry Senior, had been an Irish politician of considerable ability and some prominence on the East River side of the city. The boy's early education had been picked up in the streets (his father had got the truant officer his position) and it was thorough. Later he had received a more theoretical training in the University of New York, but I think it was his early education which stuck by him longest, and which, in the end, was probably the more useful of the two. Armed with this equipment, it was inevitable that he should develop into a star reporter. Not only did he write his news in an entertaining form, but he first made the news he wrote about. When any sensational crime had been committed which puzzled the police, Terry had an annoying way of solving the mystery himself, and publishing the full particulars in the Post-Dispatch with the glory blatantly

attributed to "our reporter." The paper was fully aware that Terence K. Patten was an acquisition to its staff. It had sent him on various commissions to various entertaining quarters of the globe, and in the course of his duty he had encountered experiences. One is forced to admit that he was not always fastidious as to the rôle he played. He had cruised about the Mediterranean as assistant cook on a millionaire's yacht, and had listened to secrets between meals. He had wandered about the country with a monkey and a hand-organ in search of a peddler he suspected of a crime. He had helped along a revolution in South America, and had gone up in a captive war balloon which had broken loose and floated off.

But all this is of no concern at present. I am merely going to chronicle his achievement in one instance—in what he himself has always referred to as the "Four-Pools Mystery." It has already been written up in reporter style as the details came to light from day to day. But a ten-year-old newspaper story is as dead as if it were written on parchment, and since the part Terry played was rather remarkable, and many of the details were at the time suppressed, I think it deserves a more permanent form.

It was through the Patterson-Pratt business by a roundabout way that I got mixed up in the Four-Pools affair. I had been working very hard over the forgery case; I spent every day on it for nine weeks—and nearly every night. I got into the way of lying awake, puzzling over the details, when I should have been sleeping, and that is the sort of work which finishes a man. By the middle of April, when the strain

was over, I was as near being a nervous wreck as an ordinarily healthy chap can get.

At this stage my doctor stepped in and ordered a rest in some quiet place out of reach of the New York papers; he suggested a fishing expedition to Cape Cod. I apathetically fell in with the idea, and invited Terry to join me. But he jeered at the notion of finding either pleasure or profit in any such trip. It was too far from the center of crime to contain any interest for Terry.

"Heavens, man! I'd as lief spend a vacation in the middle of the Sahara Desert."

"Oh, the fishing would keep things going," I said.

"Fishing! We'd die of ennui before we had a bite. I'd be murdering you at the end of the first week just for some excitement. If you need a rest—and you are rather seedy—forget all about this Patterson business and plunge into something new. The best rest in the world is a counter-irritant."

This was Terry all over; he himself was utterly devoid of nerves, and he could not appreciate the part they played in a man of normal make-up. My being threatened with nervous prostration he regarded as a joke. His pleasantries rather damped my interest in deep-sea fishing, however, and I cast about for something else. It was at this juncture that I thought of Four-Pools Plantation. "Four-Pools" was the somewhat fantastic name of a stock farm in the Shenandoah Valley, belonging to a great-uncle whom I had not seen since I was a boy.

A few months before, I had had occasion to settle a little legal matter for Colonel Gaylord (he was a colonel by

courtesy; so far as I could discover he had never had his hands on a gun except for rabbit shooting) and in the exchange of amenities which followed, he had given me a standing invitation to make the plantation my home whenever I should have occasion to come South. As I had no prospect of leaving New York, I thought nothing of it at the time; but now I determined to take the old gentleman at his word, and spend my enforced vacation in getting acquainted with my Virginia relatives.

This plan struck Terry as just one degree funnier than the fishing expedition. The doctor, however, received the idea with enthusiasm. A farm, he said, with plenty of outdoor life and no excitement, was just the thing I needed. But could he have foreseen the events which were to happen there, I doubt if he would have recommended the place for a nervous man.

CHAPTER II

Table of Contents

I ARRIVE AT FOUR-POOLS PLANTATION

Table of Contents

As I rolled southward in the train—"jerked" would be a fitter word; the roadbeds of western Virginia are anything but level—I strove to recall my old time impressions of Four-Pools Plantation. It was one of the big plantations in that part of the state, and had always been noted for its hospitality. My vague recollection of the place was a kaleidoscopic vision of music and dancing and laughter, set in the moonlit background of the Shenandoah Valley. I knew, however, that in the eighteen years since my boyhood visit everything had changed.

News had come of my aunt's death, and of Nan's runaway marriage against her father's wishes, and of how she too had died without ever returning home. Poor unhappy Nannie! I was but a boy of twelve when I had seen her last, but she had impressed even my unimpressionable age with a sense of her charm. I had heard that Jeff, the elder of the two boys, had gone completely to the bad, and having broken with his father, had drifted off to no one knew where. This to me was the saddest news of all; Jeff had been the object of my first case of hero worship.

I knew that Colonel Gaylord, now an old man, was living alone with Radnor, who I understood had grown into a fine young fellow, all that his brother had promised. My only

remembrance of the Colonel was of a tall dark man who wore riding boots and carried a heavy trainer's whip, and of whom I was very much afraid. My only remembrance of Rad was of a pretty little chap of four, eternally in mischief. It was with a mingled feeling of eagerness and regret that I looked forward to the visit—eagerness to see again the scenes which were so pleasantly associated with my boyhood, and regret that I must renew my memories under such sadly changed conditions.

As I stepped from the train, a tall broad-shouldered young man of twenty-three or thereabouts, came forward to meet me. I should have recognized him for Radnor anywhere, so striking was his resemblance to the brother I had known. He wore a loose flannel shirt and a broad-brimmed felt hat cocked on one side, and he looked so exactly the typical Southern man of the stage that I almost laughed as I greeted him. His welcome was frank and cordial and I liked him from the first. He asked after my health with an amused twinkle in his eyes. Nervous prostration evidently struck him as humorously as it did Terry. Lest I resent his apparent lack of sympathy however, he added, with a hearty whack on my shoulder, that I had come to the right place to get cured.

A drive over sweet smelling country roads behind blooded horses was a new experience to me, fresh from city streets and the rumble of elevated trains. I leaned back with a sigh of content, feeling already as if I had got my boyhood back again.

Radnor enlivened the three miles with stories of the houses we passed and the people who lived in them, and to

my law-abiding Northern ears, the recital indubitably smacked of the South. This old gentleman—so Rad called him—had kept an illicit still in his cellar for fifteen years, and it had not been discovered until after his death (of delirium tremens). The young lady who lived in that house—one of the belles of the county—had eloped with the best man on the night before the wedding and the rightful groom had shot himself. The one who lived here had eloped with her father's overseer, and had rowed across the river in the only available boat, leaving her outraged parent on the opposite bank.

I finally burst out laughing.

"Does everyone in the South run away to get married? Don't you ever have any legitimate weddings with cake and rice and old shoes?" As I spoke I remembered Nannie and wondered if I had touched on a delicate subject.

But Radnor returned my laugh.

"We do have a good many elopements," he acknowledged. "Maybe there are more cruel parents in the South." Then he suddenly sobered. "I suppose you remember Nan?" he inquired with an air of hesitation.

"A little," I assented.

"Poor girl!" he said. "I'm afraid she had a pretty tough time. You'd best not mention her to the old gentleman—or Jeff either."

"Does the Colonel still feel hard toward them?"

Radnor frowned slightly.

"He doesn't forgive," he returned.

"What was the trouble with Jeff?" I ventured. "I have never heard any particulars."

"He and my father didn't agree. I don't remember very much about it myself; I was only thirteen when it happened. But I know there was the devil of a row."

"Do you know where he is?" I asked.

Radnor shook his head.

"I sent him some money once or twice, but my father found it out and shut down on my bank account. I've lost track of him lately—he isn't in need of money though. The last I heard he was running a gambling place in Seattle."

"It's a great pity!" I sighed. "He was a fine chap when I knew him."

Radnor echoed my sigh but he did not choose to follow up the subject, and we passed the rest of the way in silence until we turned into the lane that led to Four-Pools. After the manner of many Southern places the house was situated well toward the middle of the large plantation, and entirely out of sight from the road. The private lane which led to it was bordered by a hawthorn hedge, and wound for half a mile or so between pastures and flowering peach orchards. I delightedly breathed in the fresh spring odors, wondering meanwhile how it was that I had let that happy Virginia summer of my boyhood slip so entirely from my mind.

As we rounded a clump of willow trees we came in sight of the house, set on a little rise of ground and approached by a rolling sweep of lawn. It was a good example of colonial—white with green blinds, the broad brick floored veranda, which extended the length of the front, supported by lofty Doric columns. On the south side a huge curved portico bulged out to meet the driveway. Stretching away behind the house was a sleepy box-bordered garden, and behind

this, screened by a row of evergreens, were clustered the barns and out-buildings. Some little distance to the left, in a slight hollow and half hidden by an overgrowth of laurels, stood a row of one-story weather-beaten buildings—the old negro cabins, left over from the slave days.

"It's just as I remember it!" I exclaimed delightedly as I noted one familiar object after another. "Nothing has changed."

"Nothing does change in the South," said Radnor, "except the people, and I suppose they change everywhere."

"And those are the deserted negro cabins?" I added, my eye resting on the cluster of gray roofs showing above the shrubbery.

"Just at present they are not so deserted as we should like," he returned with a suggestive undertone in his voice. "You visit the plantation at an interesting time. The Gaylord ha'nt has reappeared."

"The Gaylord ha'nt!" I exclaimed in astonishment. "What on earth is that?"

Radnor laughed.

"One of our godless ancestors once beat a slave to death and his ghost comes back, off and on, to haunt the negro cabins. We hadn't heard anything of him for a good many years and had almost forgotten the story, when last week he reappeared. Devil fires have been seen dancing in the laurels at night, and mysterious moanings have been heard around the cabins. If you have ever had anything to do with negroes, you can know the state our servants are in."

"Well!" said I, "that promises entertainment. I shall look forward to meeting the ha'nt."

We had reached the house by this time, and as we drew up before the portico the Colonel stood on the top step waiting to welcome me. He was looking much as I remembered him except that his hair had turned from black to white, and his former imperious bearing had become a trifle querulous. I jumped out and grasped his outstretched hand.

"I'm glad to see you, my boy! I'm glad to see you," he said cordially.

My heart warmed toward the old man's "my boy." It had been a good many years since anyone had called me that.

"You've grown since I saw you last," he chuckled, as he led the way into the house through the group of negro servants who had gathered to see me arrive.

My first fleeting glimpse through the open doors told me that it was indeed true, as Radnor had said, nothing had changed. The furniture was the same old-fashioned, solidly simple furniture that the house had contained since it was built. I was amused to see the Colonel's gloves and whip thrown carelessly on a chair in the hall. The whip was the one token by which I remembered him.

"So you've been working too hard, have you, Arnold?" the old man inquired, looking me over with twinkling eyes. "We'll give you something to do that will make you forget you've ever seen work before! There are half a dozen colts in the pasture just spoiling to be broken in; you may try your hand at that, sir. And now I reckon supper's about ready," he added. "Nancy doesn't allow any loitering when it's a question of beat biscuits. Take him up to his room, Rad—and

you Mose," he called to one of the negroes hanging about the portico, "come and carry up Marse Arnold's things."

At this one of them shambled forward and began picking up my traps which had been dumped in a pile on the steps. His appearance struck me with such an instant feeling of repugnance, that even after I was used to the fellow, I never quite overcame that first involuntary shudder. He was not a full-blooded negro but an octoroon. His color was a muddy yellow, his features were sharp instead of flat, and his hair hung across his forehead almost straight. But these facts alone did not account for his queerness; the most uncanny thing about him was the color of his eyes. They had a yellow glint and narrowed in the light. The creature was bare-footed and wore a faded suit of linsey-woolsey; I wondered at that, for the other servants who had crowded out to see me, were dressed in very decent livery.

Radnor noticed my surprise, and remarked as he led the way up the winding staircase, "Mose isn't much of a beauty, for a fact."

I made no reply as the man was close behind, and the feeling that his eyes were boring into the middle of my back was far from pleasant. But after he had deposited his load on the floor of my room, and, with a sidewise glance which seemed to take in everything without looking directly at anything, had shambled off again, I turned to Rad.

"What's the matter with him?" I demanded.

Radnor threw back his head and laughed.

"You look as if you'd seen the ha'nt! There's nothing to be afraid of. He doesn't bite. The poor fellow's half witted—at least in some respects; in others he's doubly witted."

"Who is he?" I persisted. "Where did he come from?"

"Oh, he's lived here all his life—raised on the place. We're as fond of Mose as if he were a member of the family. He's my father's body servant and he follows him around like a dog. We don't keep him dressed for the part because shoes and stockings make him unhappy."

"But his eyes," I said. "What the deuce is the matter with his eyes?"

Radnor shrugged his shoulders.

"Born that way. His eyes *are* a little queer, but if you've ever noticed it, niggers' eyes are often yellow. The people on the place call him 'Cat-Eye Mose.' You needn't be afraid of him," he added with another laugh, "he's harmless."

CHAPTER III

Table of Contents

I MAKE THE ACQUAINTANCE OF THE HA'NT

Table of Contents

We had a sensation at supper that night, and I commenced to realize that I was a good many miles from New York. In response to the invitation of Solomon, the old negro butler, we seated ourselves at the table and commenced on the cold dishes before us, while he withdrew to bring in the hot things from the kitchen. As is often the case in Southern plantation houses the kitchen was under a separate roof from the main house, and connected with it by a long open gallery. We waited some time but no supper arrived. The Colonel, becoming impatient, was on the point of going to look for it, when the door burst open and Solomon appeared empty-handed, every hair on his woolly head pointing a different direction.

"De ha'nt, Marse Cunnel, de ha'nt! He's sperrited off de chicken. Right outen de oven from under Nancy's eyes."

"Solomon," said the Colonel severely, "what are you trying to say? Talk sense."

"Sho's yuh bohn, Marse Cunnel; it's de libbin' truf I's tellin' yuh. Dat ha'nt has fotched dat chicken right outen de oven, an' it's vanished in de air."

"You go out and bring that chicken in and don't let me hear another word."

"I cayn't, Marse Cunnel, 'deed I cayn't. Dere ain't no chicken dere."

"Very well, then! Go and get us some ham and eggs and stop this fuss."

Solomon withdrew and we three looked at each other.

"Rad, what's the meaning of this?" the Colonel demanded querulously.

"Some foolishness on the part of the niggers. I'll look into it after supper. When the ha'nt begins abstracting chickens from the oven I think it's time to investigate."

Being naturally curious over the matter, I commenced asking questions about the history and prior appearances of the ha'nt. Radnor answered readily enough, but I noticed that the Colonel appeared restless under the inquiry, and the amused suspicion crossed my mind that he did not entirely discredit the story. When a man has been born and brought up among negroes he comes, in spite of himself, to be tinged with their ideas.

Supper finished, the three of us turned down the gallery toward the kitchen. As we approached the door we heard a murmur of voices, one rising every now and then in a shrill wail which furnished a sort of chorus. Radnor whispered in my ear that he reckoned Nancy had "got um" again. Though I did not comprehend at the moment, I subsequently learned that "um" referred to a sort of emotional ecstasy into which Nancy occasionally worked herself, the motive power being indifferently ghosts or religion.

The kitchen was a large square room, with brick floor, rough shack walls and smoky rafters overhead from which pended strings of garlic, red peppers and herbs. The light

was supplied ostensibly by two tallow dips, but in reality by the glowing wood embers of the great open stove bricked into one side of the wall.

Five or six excited negroes were grouped in a circle about a woman with a yellow turban on her head, who was rocking back and forth and shouting at intervals:

"Oh-h, dere's sperrits in de air! I can smell um. I can smell um."

"Nancy!" called the Colonel sharply as we stepped into the room.

Nancy paused a moment and turned upon us a pair of frenzied eyes with nothing much but the whites showing.

"Marse Cunnel, dere's sperrits in de air," she cried. "Sabe yuhself while dere's time. We's all a-treadin' de road to destruction."

"You'll be treading the road to destruction in mighty short order if you don't keep still," he returned grimly. "Now stop this foolishness and tell me what's gone with that chicken."

After a great deal of questioning and patching together, we finally got her story, but I cannot say that it threw much light upon the matter. She had put the chicken in the oven, and then she felt powerful queer, as if something were going to happen. Suddenly she felt a cold wind blow through the room, the candles went out, and she could hear the rustle of "ghostly gahments" sweeping past her. The oven door sprang open of its own accord; she looked inside, and "dere wa'n't no chicken dere!"

Repeated questioning only brought out the same statement but with more circumstantial details. The other negroes backed her up, and the story grew rapidly in

magnitude and horror. Nancy's seizures, it appeared, were contagious, and the others by this time were almost as excited as she. The only approximately calm one among them was Cat-Eye Mose who sat in the doorway watching the scene with half furtive eyes and something resembling a grin on his face.

The Colonel, observing that it was a good deal of commotion for the sake of one small chicken, disgustedly dropped the inquiry. As we stepped out into the gallery again, I glanced back at the dancing firelight, the weird cross shadows, and the circle of dusky faces, with, I confess, a somewhat creepy feeling. I could see that in such an atmosphere, it would not take long for superstition to lay its hold on a man.

"What's the meaning of it?" I asked as we strolled slowly toward the house.

"The meaning of it," Radnor shrugged, "is that some of them are lying. The ha'nt, I could swear, has a good flesh and blood appetite. Nancy has been frightened and she believes her own story. There's never any use in trying to sift a negro's lies; they have so much imagination that after five minutes they believe themselves."

"I think I could spot the ghost," I returned. "And that's your precious Cat-Eye Mose."

Radnor shook his head.

"Mose doesn't need to steal chickens. He gets all he wants."

"Mose," the Colonel added emphatically, "is the one person on the place who is absolutely to be trusted."