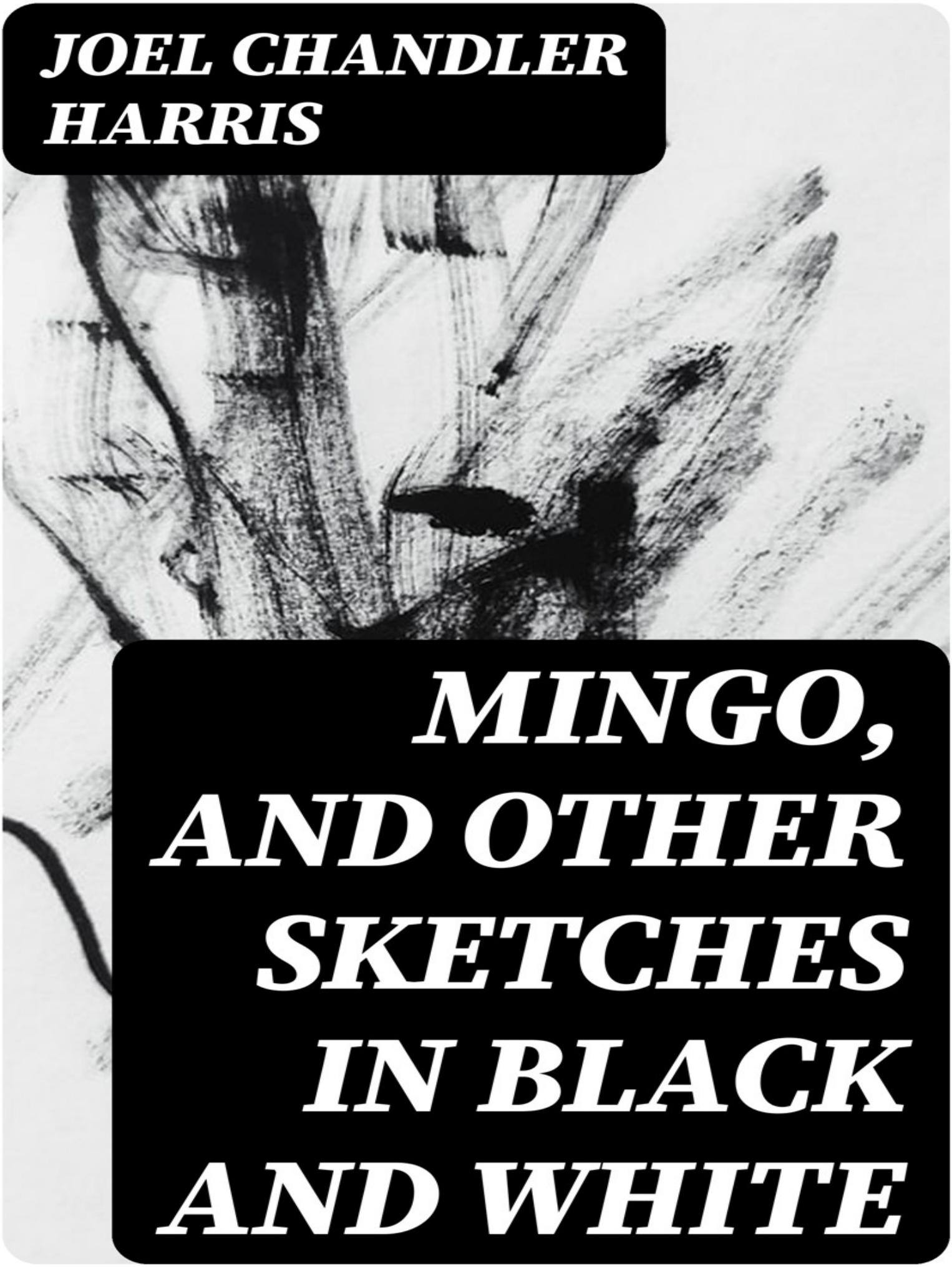
JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS



MINGO, AND OTHER SKETCHES IN BLACK AND WHITE

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Mingo, and Other Sketches in Black and White

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Table of Contents

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I.

IN 1876, circumstances, partly accidental and partly sentimental, led me to revisit Crooked Creek Church, near the little village of Rockville, in Middle Georgia. I was amazed at the changes which a few brief years had wrought. The ancient oaks ranged roundabout remained the same, but upon everything else time had laid its hand right heavily. Even the building seemed to have shrunk: the pulpit was less massive and imposing, the darkness beyond the rafters less mysterious. The preacher had grown grey, and feebleness had taken the place of that physical vigour which was the distinguishing feature of his interpretations of the larger problems of theology. People I had never seen sat in the places of those I had known so well. There were only traces here and there of the old congregation, whose austere simplicity had made so deep an impression upon my youthful mind The blooming girls of 1860 had grown into careworn matrons, and the young men had developed in their features the strenuous uncertainty and misery of the period of desolation and disaster through which they had passed. Anxiety had so ground itself into their lives that a

stranger to the manner might well have been pardoned for giving a sinister interpretation to these pitiable manifestations of hopelessness and unsuccess.

I had known the venerable preacher intimately in the past; but his eyes, wandering vaguely over the congregation, and resting curiously upon me, betrayed no recognition. Age, which had whitened his hair and enfeebled his voice, seemed also to have given him the privilege of ignoring everything but the grave and the mysteries beyond.

These swift processes of change and decay were calculated to make a profound impression, but my attention was called away from all such reflections. Upon a bench near the pulpit, in the section reserved for the coloured members, sat an old negro man whose face was perfectly familiar. I had known him in my boyhood as Mingo, the carriage-driver and body-servant of Judge Junius Wornum. He had changed but little. His head was whiter than when I saw him last, but his attitude was as firm and as erect, and the evidences of his wonderful physical strength as apparent, as ever. He sat with his right hand to his chin, his strong serious face turned contemplatively toward the rafters. When his eye chanced to meet mine, a smile of recognition lit up his features, his head and body drooped forward, and his hand fell away from his face, completing a salutation at once graceful, picturesque, and imposing.

I have said that few evidences of change manifested themselves in Mingo; and so it seemed at first, but a closer inspection showed one remarkable change. I had known him when his chief purpose in life seemed to be to enjoy himself.

He was a slave, to be sure, but his condition was no restraint upon his spirits. He was known far and wide as "Laughing Mingo," and upon hundreds of occasions he was the boon companion of the young men about Rockville in their wild escapades. Many who read this will remember the "'possum suppers" which it was Mingo's delight to prepare for these young men, and he counted among his friends and patrons many who afterward became distinguished both in war and in the civil professions. At these gatherings, Mingo, bustling around and serving his guests, would keep the table in a roar with his quaint sayings, and his local satires in the shape of impromptu doggerel; and he would also repeat snatches of orations which he had heard in Washington when Judge Wornum was a member of Congress. But his chief accomplishments lay in the wonderful ease and fluency with which he imitated the eloquent appeals of certain ambitious members of the Kockville bar, and in his travesties of the bombastic flights of the stump-speakers of that day.

It appeared, however, as he sat in the church, gazing thoughtfully and earnestly at the preacher, that the old-time spirit of fun and humour had been utterly washed out of his face. There was no sign of grief, no mark of distress, but he had the air of settled anxiety belonging to those who are tortured by an overpowering responsibility. Apparently here was an interesting study. If the responsibilities of life are problems to those who have been trained to solve them, how much more formidable must they be to this poor negro but lately lifted to his feet! Thus my reflections took note of

the pathetic associations and suggestions clustering around this dignified representative of an unfortunate race.

Upon this particular occasion church services were to extend into the afternoon, and there was an interval of rest after the morning sermon, covering the hour of noon. This interval was devoted by both old and young to the discussion of matters seriously practical. The members of the congregation had brought their dinner baskets, and the contents thereof were spread around under the trees in true pastoral style. Those who came unprovided were, in pursuance of an immemorial custom of the section and the occasion, taken in charge by the simple and hearty hospitality of the members.

Somehow I was interested in watching Mingo. As he passed from the church with the congregation, and moved slowly along under the trees, he presented quite a contrast to the other negroes who were present. These, with the results of their rural surroundings superadded to the natural shyness of their race, hung upon the outskirts of the assembly, as though their presence was merely casual, while Mingo passed along from group to group of his white friends and acquaintances with that familiar and confident air of meritorious humility and unpretentious dignity which is associated with good-breeding and gentility the world over. When he lifted his hat in salutation, there was no servility in the gesture; when he bent his head, and dropped his eyes upon the ground, his dignity was strengthened and fortified rather than compromised. Both his manners and his dress retained the flavour of a social system the exceptional features of which were too often by both friend and foe

made to stand for the system itself. His tall beaver, with its curled brim, and his blue broadcloth dress-coat, faded and frayed, with its brass buttons, bore unmistakable evidence of their age and origin, but they seemed to be a reasonable and necessary contribution to his individuality.

Passing slowly through the crowd, Mingo made his way to a double-seated buggy shielded from all contingencies of sun and rain by an immense umbrella. Prom beneath the seat he drew forth a large hamper, and proceeded to arrange its contents upon a wide bench which stood near.

While this was going on I observed a tall angular woman, accompanied by a bright-looking little girl, making her way toward Mingo's buggy. The woman was plainly, oven shabbily, dressed, so that the gay ribbons and flowers worn by the child were gaudy by contrast. The woman pressed forward with decision, her movements betraying a total absence of that undulatory grace characteristic of the gentler sex, while the little girl dancing about her showed not only the grace and beauty of youth, but a certain refinement of pose and gesture calculated to attract attention.

Mingo made way for these with ready deference, and after a little I saw him coming toward me. He came forward, shook hands, and remarked that he had brought me an invitation to dine with Mrs. Feratia Bivins.

"Miss F'raishy 'members you, boss," he said, bowing and smiling, "en she up'n say she be mighty glad er yo' comp'ny ef you kin put up wid cole vittles an' po' far'; en ef you come," he added on his own account, "we like it mighty well."

II.

ACCEPTING the invitation, I presently found myself dining with Mrs. Bivins, and listening to her remarkable flow of small-talk, while Mingo hovered around, the embodiment of active hospitality.

"Mingo 'lowed he'd ast you up," said Mrs. Bivins, "an' I says, says I, 'Don't you be a-pesterin' the gentulmun, when you know thar's plenty er the new-issue quality ready an' a-waitin' to pull an' haul at 'im,' says I. Not that I begrudge the vittles—not by no means; I hope I hain't got to that yit. But somehow er 'nother folks what hain't got no great shakes to brag 'bout gener'ly feels sorter skittish when strange folks draps in on 'em. Goodness knows I hain't come to that pass wher' I begrudges the vittles that folks eats, bekaze anybody betweenst this an' Clinton, Jones County, Georgy, 'll tell you the Sanderses wa'n't the set to stint the'r stomachs. I was a Sanders 'fore I married, an' when I come 'way frum pa's house hit was thes like turnin' my back on a barbecue. Not by no means was I begrudgin' of the vittles. Says I, 'Mingo,' says I, 'ef the gentulmun is a teetotal stranger, an' nobody else hain't got the common perliteness to ast 'im, shorely you mus' ast 'im,' says I; 'but don't go an' make no great to-do,' says I; 'bekaze the little we got mightent be satisfactual to the gentulmun,' says I. What we got may be little enough, an' it may be too much, but hit's welcome."

It would be impossible to convey an idea of the emphasis which Mrs. Bivins imposed upon her conversation. She talked rapidly, but with a certain deliberation of manner

which gave a quaint interest to everything she said. She had thin grey hair, a prominent nose, firm thin lips, and eyes that gave a keen and sparkling individuality to sharp and homely features. She had evidently seen sorrow and defied it. There was no suggestion of compromise in manner or expression. Even her hospitality was uncompromising. I endeavoured to murmur my thanks to Mrs. Bivins for Mingo's thoughtfulness, but her persistent conversation drowned out such poor phrases as I could hastily frame.

"Come 'ere, Pud Hon," continued Mrs. Bivins, calling the child, and trimming the demonstrative terms of "Pudding" and "Honey" to suit all exigencies of affection—"come 'ere, Pud Hon, an' tell the gentulmun howdy. Gracious me! don't be so *countrified*. He ain't a-gwine to *bite* you. No, sir, you won't fine no begrudgers mixed up with the *Sanderses*. Hit useter be a *common* sayin' in Jones, an' cle'r 'cross into Jasper, that pa would 'a bin a rich man an' 'a owned *niggers* if it hadn't but 'a bin bekase he sot his head agin stintin' of his stomach. That's what they useter say—usen't they, Mingo?"

"Dat w'at I year tell, Miss F'raishy—sho'," Mingo assented, with great heartiness. But Mrs. Bivins's volubility would hardly wait for this perfunctory indorsement. She talked as she arranged the dishes, and occasionally she would hold a piece of crockery suspended in the air as she emphasised her words. She dropped into a mortuary strain —"Poor pa! I don't never have nuthin' extry an' I don't never see a dish er fried chicken but what pa pops in my mind. A better man hain't never draw'd the breath of life—that they hain't. An' he was thes as gayly as a kitten. When we gals'd

have comp'ny to dinner, pore pa he'd cut his eye at me, an' up an' say, says he, 'Gals, this 'ere turkey's mighty nice, yit I'm reely afeared you put too much inguns in the stuffin. Maybe the young men don't like 'em as good as you all does;' an' then pore pa'd drap his knife an' fork, an' laugh tell the tears come in his eyes. Sister Prue she useter run off an' have a cry, but I was one er the kind what wa'n't easy sot back.

"I'd 'a bin mighty glad if Pud yer had er took airter pa's famerly, but frum the tip eend er her toe nails to the toppermust ha'r of her head she's a Wornum. Hit ain't on'y thes a streak yer an' a stripe thar—hit's the whole bolt. I reckon maybe you know'd ole Jedge June Wornum; well, Jedge June he was Pud's gran'pa, an' Deely Wornum was her ma. Maybe you might 'a seed Deely when she was a school-gal."

Cordelia Wornum! No doubt my astonishment made itself apparent, for Mrs. Bivins bridled up promptly, and there was a clearly perceptible note of defiance in her tone as she proceeded.

"Yes, sir-ree! *An' make no mistake!* Deely Wornum married my son, an' Henry Clay Bivina made 'er a good husbun', if I do have to give it out myse'f. Yes, 'ndeed! An' yit if you'd 'a heern the rippit them Wornums kicked up, you'd 'a thought the pore chile'd done took'n run off 'long of a whole passel er high pirates frum somewheres er 'nother. In about that time the ole Jedge he got sorter fibbled up, some say in his feet, an' some say in his head; but his wife, that Em'ly Wornum, she taken on awful. I never seen her a-gwine on myse'f; not that they was any hidin' out 'mongst

the Bivinses er the Sanderses—bless you, no! bekaze here's what wa'n't afeared er all the Wornums in the continental State er Georgy, not if they'd 'a mustered out under the lead er ole Nick hisse'f, which I have my doubta if he wa'n't somewheres aroun'. I never seen 'er, but I heern tell er how she was a-cuttin' up. You mayn't think it, but that 'oman taken it on herse'f to call up all the niggers on the place an' give 'em her forbiddance to go an' see the'r young mistiss."

"Yit I lay dey tuck 'n sneak 'roun' en come anyhow, ain't dey, Miss F'raishy?" inquired Mingo, rubbing his hands together and smiling blandly.

"*That* they did—*that* they did!" was Mrs. Bivins's emphatic response. "Niggers is niggers, but them Wornum niggers was a cut er two 'bove the common run. I'll say that, an' I'll say it on the witness stan'. Freedom might a turned the'r heads when it come to t'other folks, but hit didn't never turn the'r heads 'bout the'r young mistiss. An' if Mingo here hain't done his juty 'cordin' to his lights, then I dunner what juty is. I'll say that open an' above-board, high an' low."

The curious air of condescension which Mrs. Bivins assumed as she said this, the tone of apology which she employed in paying this tribute to Mingo and the Wornum negroes, formed a remarkable study. Evidently she desired me distinctly to understand that in applauding these worthy coloured people she was in no wise compromising her own dignity.

Thus Mrs. Bivins rattled away, pausing only long enough now and then to deplore my lack of appetite. Meanwhile Mingo officiated around the improvised board with gentle

affability; and the little girl, bearing strong traces of her lineage in her features—a resemblance which was confirmed by a pretty little petulance of temper—made it convenient now and again to convey a number of tea cakes into Mingo's hat, which happened to be sitting near, the conveyance taking place in spite of laughable pantomimic protests on the part of the old man, ranging from appealing nods and grimaces to indignant frowns and gestures.

"When Deely died," Mrs. Bivins went on, waving a towel over a tempting jar of preserves, "they wa'n't nobody but what was afeared to break it to Emily Wornum, an' the pore chile'd done been buried too long to talk about before her ma heern tell of it, an' then she drapped like a clap er thunder had hit 'er. Airter so long a time, Mingo thar he taken it 'pun hisse'f to tell 'er, an' she flopped right down in 'er tracks, an' Mingo he holp 'er into the house, an', bless your life, when he come to he'p 'er out'n it, she was a changed 'oman. 'Twa'n't long 'fore she taken a notion to come to my house, an' one mornin' when I was a-washin' up dishes, I heern some un holler at the gate, an' thar sot Mingo peerched up on the Wornum carry-all, an' of all livin' flesh, who should be in thar but ole Emily Wornum!

"Hit's a sin to say it," continued Mrs. Bivins, smiling a dubious little smile that was not without its serious suggestions, "but I tightened up my apern strings, an' flung my glance aroun' tell hit drapped on the battlin'-stick, bekaze I flared up the minnit I seen 'er, an' I says to myse'f, says I: 'If hit's a fracas youer huntin', my lady, I lay you won't hafter put on your specs to fine it.' An' then I says to Pud, says I—

"'Pud Hon, go in the shed-room thar, chile, an' if you hear anybody a-hollerin' an' a-squallin', thes shet your eyeleds an' grit your teeth, bekaze hit'll be your pore ole granny a-tryin' to git even with some er your kin.'

"An' then I taken a cheer an' sot down by the winder. D'reckly in come Emily Wornum, an' I wish I may die if I'd 'a know'd 'er if I'd saw 'er anywheres else on the face er the yeth. She had this 'ere kinder dazzled look what wimmen has airter they bin baptized in the water. I helt my head high, but I kep' my eye on the battlin'-stick, an' if she'd 'a made fight, I'll be boun' they'd 'a bin some ole sco'es settled then an' thar if ole sco'es ken be settled by a frailin'. But, bless your heart, they wa'n't never no cammer 'oman than what Emily Wornum was; an' if you'd 'a know'd 'er, an' Mingo wa'n't here to b'ar me out, I wish I may die if I wouldn't be afeared to tell you how ca'm an' supjued that 'oman was, which in her young days she was a tarrifier. She up an' says, says she—

"'Is Mizzers Bivins in?'

"'Yessum,' says I, 'she is that-away. An more 'n that, nobody don't hafter come on this hill an' holler more 'n twicet 'thout gittin'some kinder answer back. *Yessum!* An' what's more, Mizzers Bivins is come to that time er life when she's mighty proud to git calls from the big- bugs. If I had as much perliteness, ma'am, as I is cheers, I'd ast you to set down,' says I.

"She stood thar, she did, thes as cool as a cowcumber; but d'reckly she ups an' says, says she—

"'Might I see my little gran'chile?' says she.

"'Oho, ma'am!' says I; 'things is come to a mighty purty pass when quality folks has to go frum house to house a-huntin' up pore white trash, an' a-astin' airter the'r kin. Tooby shore! tooby shore! Yessum, a mighty purty pass,' says I."

I cannot hope to give even a faint intimation of the remarkable dramatic fervour and earnestness of this recital, nor shall I attempt to describe the rude eloquence of attitude and expression; but they seemed to represent the real or fancied wrongs of a class, and to spring from the pent-up rage of a century.

"I wa'n't lookin' fer no compermise, nuther," Mrs. Bivins continued. "I fully spected 'er to flar' up an' fly at me; but 'stedder that, she kep' a- stan'in' thar lookin' thes like folks does when theyer runnin' over sump'n in the'r min'. Then her eye lit on some 'er the pictur's what Deely had hung up on the side er the house, an' in pertic'lar one what some 'er the Woruum niggers had fetched 'er, whar a great big dog was a-watehin' by a little bit er baby. When she seen that, bless your soul, she thes sunk right down on the floor, an' clincht 'er han's, an' brung a gasp what looked like it might er bin the last, an' d'reckly she ast, in a whisper, says she—

"'Was this my dear daughter's room?'

"Maybe you think," said Mrs. Bivins, regarding me coldly and critically, and pressing her thin lips more firmly together, if that could be—"maybe you think I oughter wrung my han's, an' pitied that 'oman kneelin' thar in that room whar all my trouble was born an' bred. Some folks would 'a flopped down by 'er, an' I won't deny but what hit come over me; but the nex' minnit hit flashed acrost me as

quick an' hot as powder how she'd 'a bin a-houndin' airter me an' my son, an' a-treatin' us like as we'd 'a bin the offscourin's er creation, an' how she cast off her own daughter, which Deely was as good a gal as ever draw'd the breath er life—when all this come over me, hit seem like to me that I couldn't keep my paws off'n 'er. I hope the Lord'll forgive me—that I do—but if hit hadn't but 'a bin for my raisin', I'd 'a jumped at Emily Wornum an' 'a spit in 'er face an' 'a clawed 'er eyes out'n 'er. An' yit, with ole Nick a-tuggin' at me, I was a Christun 'nuff to thank the Lord that they was a tender place in that pore miserbul creetur's soul-case.

"When I seen her a-kneelin' thar, with 'er year-rings a-danglin' an' 'er fine feathers a-tossin' an' a-trimblin', leetle more an' my thoughts would 'a sot me afire. I riz an' I stood over her, an' I says, says I—

"'Emily Wornum, whar you er huntin' the dead you oughter hunted the livin'. What's betwix' you an' your Maker *I* can't tell,' says I, 'but if you git down on your face an' lick the dirt what Deely Bivins walked on, still you won't be humble enough for to go whar *she's* gone, nor good enough nuther. She died right yer while you was a-traipsin' an' a-trollopin' roun' frum pos' to pillar a-upholdin' your quality idees. These arms helt 'er,' says I, 'an' ef hit hadn't but 'a bin for *her*, Emily Wornum,' says I, 'I'd 'a strangled the life out'n you time your shadder darkened my door. An' what's more,' says I, 'ef youer come to bother airter Pud, *the make the trail of it. Thes so much as lay the weight er your little finger on 'er,*' says I, '*an' I'll grab you by the goozle an' t'ar your haslet out*,' says I."