

# OLD SIMON'S FLUTE

Bill the Poet Found Romance Waiting at the  
End of It in the Land of Dixie

Illustrations by J. L. S. Williams

THERE is many a river that lives in song, but this river lives only in the song that it sings itself. Far from the clock-tuned toil of man, this river is in the day a ribbon raveled from the sun, in the night a sister to the Milky Way. Its pebbles, white and blue and amber, are like the eggs of the birds that sing along the shore—sing with low and drowsy sweetness in the moonlight when Nature takes her dazzled doze, sing in rehearsal of riotous opera when the morning, as a yellowed lark, arises from its nest, the night.

Amid the magnolias the evening sighs its perfume, and the bursting of the wild bud is as laughter—silent mirth, the throb of Nature's melody made visible. The country does not merely lie about, it lolls, and the farmhouse, old and mossed, appears as if it too had come from the sprouting and the growth of a seed. All were as the mingled parts of a dream, a reverie of gentle reproach against the greed and the strife which the hastening ones among us call the progress of the world.

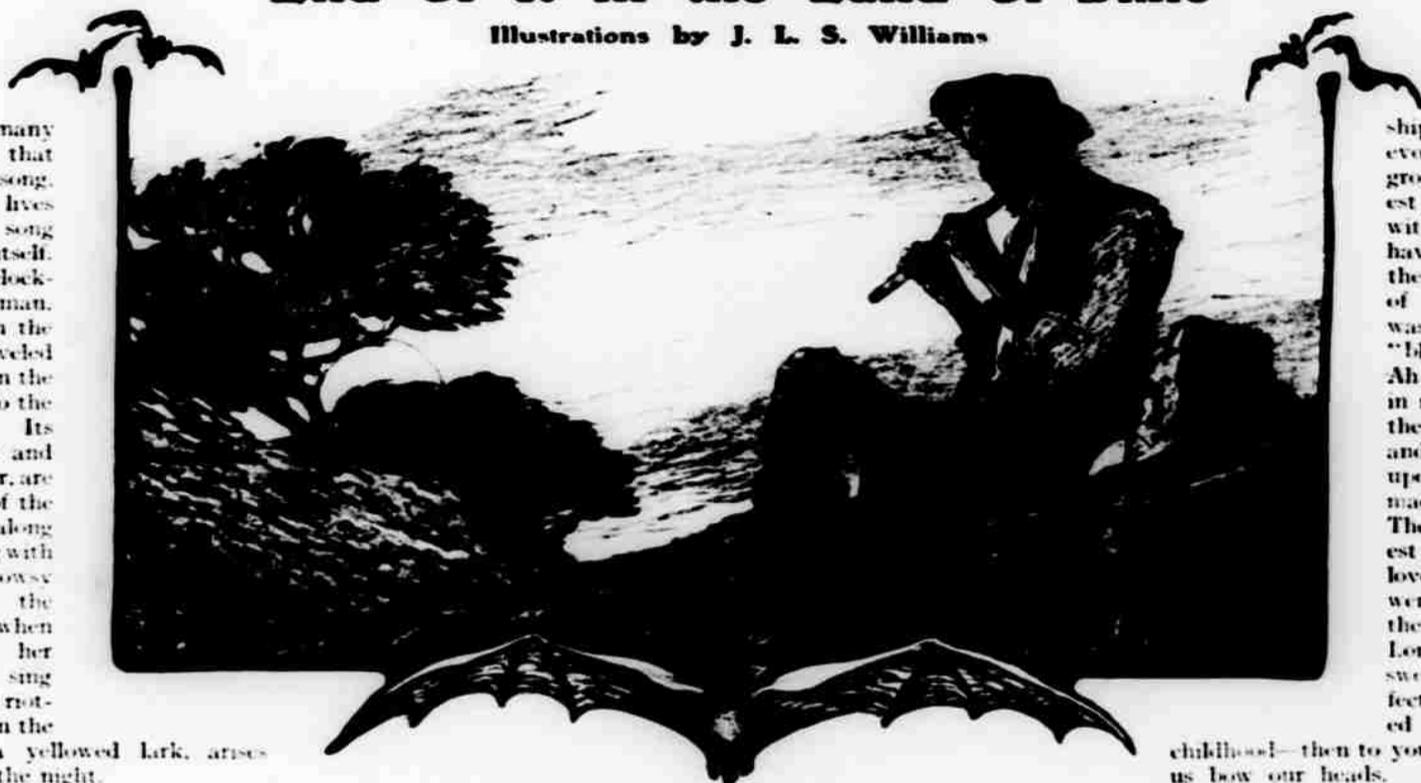
For one who had never taken up life as a burden, or for one weary of the gnarls and wind-shakes of business, how sweet merely to breathe here amid the flowers, within the circle of this rest-wreath! On a still day when Nature seemed to hold her breath, the keen of ear sometimes boasted that they could distinguish the whistle of a railway train far beyond that mystic line, the horizon; but these boosters were the breakers of the idols of peace, youthful and adventurous spirits longing to engage in the warfare of commerce. Those of the old-time, the silvery of head, resented the whistle of steam, the shriek of demonic hurry—lying on from day to day, thankful for the soft and sympathetic air. "Age has taught us that the tenderest part of life is a dream," said the old Colonel. "And if this be true, let us dream our little longer in quiet. There will remain time enough to mar this river with a mill."

And then spoke the man who had come on business. "But, sir, I bring opportunity. I will pay a good price for your land, and this sawmill—"

"My dear sir," the Colonel broke in, "please don't speak of sawmills. And don't tell me that I am sitting here blocking the progress of the world. The world is going to be here a good while, sir—existing points to this probability—but industry must be short. You know that an old man lives in the past. And it is a great pleasure to look back and to see the surroundings of my past almost unchanged—the same river with its song, the same birds, the same old nests sitting at night on the roof of his cabin blowing the moon-beams through his flute. Such things are not for sale."

And, thus it was, the past ever beneath the immediate eye, with no distracting future in sight, nothing except the years gone by, golden hinged to the minute that was now.

The Colonel had spoken of a negro who sat on the roof of his cabin, blowing his flute. It was old Simon. He always began to play at the first peep of the moon, and it was then that the bird, deep in the shadow, murmured his lute brought over from the daytime, as sweets are taken from the feast; and it was then too that the great frog amid the rank rushes "Wagnered" his notes upon the air—all aroused by old Simon, who blew the notes of the moon-beams through his flute. No matter how cloudy the night, the neighbors always knew when the moon was rising, for there came the music of



ship, soft laughter evolved out of a groan, the tenderest motherhood without perhaps having been a mother, the sweetest of love because it was unselfish—the "black mammy." Ah! they say that in raiment of glory the souls of the just and the pure walk upon the streets not made by hands. Then to you, greatest one because you loved the most and were humblest in the sight of the Lord—then to you, sweet melody of affection, thou sainted one of many a

childhood—then to you must we all of us bow our heads.

Old Rachel lived alone, this poetic past on the crumbling verge of the present. Out into the tempest of the world had gone her children, to be tossed, to be heard of no more; but here she lived as in the olden day, loving the world and worshipping God.

How quaint her humor, the echo of a remembered tune! She had nursed all of the Colonel's children—had nursed even the old man himself. To the latter-day children she sang a song, about the "Hog-Eye Man":

Oh, de hog-eye man he died long ago,  
Erway back yander in de slavery time,  
An' his body's asleep whar de cotton woods grow,  
An' his soul is judged crookin' ter his crime.

Oh, I hope dat de Lawd has fergilben his sins;  
An' I know Mars Jesus ain't denied him er smile,  
Fer he sung ter de chillun, an' er sweet song wins  
In de mussy o' de Saviour—w'en it's sung ter er chile.

Old Simon did not blow his flute in the daytime, and so this gave him opportunity for gallantry, and his gallantry was his repeated proposal of marriage to "Mammy" Rachel. "An' now look yar," he said one day, "ef you'll marry me, I'll blow dat flute all de time."

"Yas," she laughed, "you'se like de bird dat sing ter his mate while de mate do all de work. I knows you, Simon."

"No, you doan know me well eruff, caze if you did you'd be my blushin' bride."

"Look yar, man, how many blushin' brides has you had, fust an' last?"

"Now, look yar yo'se'r, lady. W'y you all de time want ter go off inter 'rithmetic? Ain't yo' got no consolation fur er man o' grief? Ef I has had er good many wives, it showed dat de ladies had confidence in me, an' of dey wuz tuck erway, it showed dat de Lord loved 'em."

"Let me see," said "Mammy," "dar was Emerline an' Sue an' Jane—"

"Hol' on! It ain't right ter remind me o' all dat grief. In dis worl' it's er woman's place ter make er man happy. An' what's de use o' you livin' yar by yo'se'r? Now you marry me an' come on down to my house. No, I'll come up yar an' live wid you, an' I kin sell my house. Do it hit you in de heart?"

"No, Simon; caze ef I married yo' an' you come up yar, it poor like Miss Virginia wouldn't be so free ter come yar an' stay wid me, er listern ter de tales o' de long ago—about de day w'en dat fine genterman come from off yander an' married my sweet young mistress, her mother. An' laws er massed wadn't da happy fur yars an' yars—till de summons come fur yo' luf! An' w'en Miss Lucy she wuz on her death bed, she says ter me, she say, "Mammy" Rachel, de white folks is good eruff in dar own way, but I want you to look after my little Virginia, as you has looked after me."

"An' so it has been de chile er growin' up wid her white arms aroun' dis black neck, lovin' me wad all her beautiful heart, an' now she is de

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the flute; and even while the rain was pattering softly down upon the moss, they were wont to say: "Ah, there is Simon's flute—the moon is up."

Black as the darkness at midnight that falls after the lightning's flash was this old Simon; but he was a nurser of bright traditions, children that were always young, that were not destined to attain their growth. These traditions were mostly fancies, woven in this old man's mind. By the hour he would talk of persons who never existed, of young Mars Jim who slew the great dragon, half bear and half wolf, and of young Miss May who wandered off down into the river-bottom to be turned into a lily. Her parents came and looked upon her as she stood there, but they could not pull her up to take her home, being sympathetic parents, so they let her remain there, growing, and she grew more beautiful every day.

But at last there came a young man named—why, it was young Mars Jim—and he stood and looked at Miss May, the lily, and shed tears, for he loved her; and the dew-gathered on the lily, for it was seen that she too was weeping, though it seemed to be more for joy than for sorrow. But Mars Jim was not content to look at Miss May. He wanted to take her with him, so he pulled her up and started across the fields with her; but just as he came to a low and marshy place he was shot by an Indian's arrow, and down he fell with the lily in his hand. His blood ran out and stained the lily; and then there followed something that old Simon couldn't well explain, though everything thus far had been reasonably clear. It was this: At the exact spot where the lily had lain in the blood of Mars Jim there grew up a flower, red and white blended. And the people called it a tulip.

Not far from the river stood old Simon's cabin, and the roof was covered over with moss, except in one place, where the old man sat to blow his flute. The children believed that he really blew the moon-beams through, and a little boy, wanting to astonish his sister, declared that once when the old man shook his flute a star flew out of the end of it and fell into the river and so scared the great frog that he didn't sing any more for a week.

Old Aunt Rachel—"black mammy" of the dearest and most sacred type—pretended to believe the boy's story, and to hear her tell about the marvels of the flute must have convinced the most doubting mind. Her voice was so tender that everything she said was uttered with persuasion. Never again on earth can this old woman's like exist. A virtue grown out of human error, and out of that sweet mercilessness of all things known to the sea, the slave-