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LOST ROSIE; OR, KOUNTZ THE CONJURER.

BY MARY E. BRYAN.
From the Sunny South.

It was a mud-daubed cabin, but so overgrown with the dark green foliage and crimson, yellow-throated blossoms of the Trumpet vine, that it seemed a part of the wild, beautiful nature around it. Out of the low doorway a slender girl, with the olive skin, the black eyes and black-waved hair of the native Louisiana. Over the luxuriance of the hair was thrown a red-banded kerchief, and the girl farther shaded her eyes with her hand as she stood and looked first around the yard, then over into the fields and across to the low hills that were surrounded by the clearing, all the time calling "Rosie," in a shrill but not unusual voice. She stood still a moment, and then leaping the low fence as lightly as a fawn, ran down to the tiny ruiet at the foot of the little rise on which the house stood, and searched among the bushes for green peas that were the water's course. A noisy crow mocked her call overhead, and scattered a handful of pecan nuts open her from the boughs he was robbing; an oriole flew out from a scarlet haw bush and flashed away, startled by her cry of "Rosie," but no pretty bird was plucked. "Here I am, sister," in answer to her call.

Returning to the cabin, she took a horn from over the door and blew a blast upon it that set half a dozen dogs to yelping, and after the lapse of a few minutes, brought her brother, a boy of fifteen from the fields.

"Have you seen Rosie?" was her question as he stood before her, his homespun clothes spotted with cotton flakes, and further ornamented by two or three striped caterpillars, which were industriously measuring the length of his pantaloons.

"Seen Rosie? No, not since she brought me my canteen of fresh water this morning. She came back home, though. I saw her running a race with Wolf clear up to the turnip patch."

"She did come back, but she slipped away while you were talking to me, and I haven't seen her since."

"Talkin' to Zummy Karise," he said. "I saw him comin' this way, ridin' that mustang like the mad devil he is."

"It's no matter who he is talking to; Rosie is gone, and she must be found right away. We must go and hunt her. Take Wolf with you, he will help us find her."

"Where is Wolf? He must be with the child. He always follows her, you know. Oh, she is safe enough; if anything had happened to her, you'd have Wolf back here howling like a pack of his namesakes."

"I cannot trust to that; I feel as if something was wrong with her. She never does go farther than her little grapevine swing there in the bottom, and always comes when I call. You remember little Pierre Verne, who was missing last year and never found, and the couple of little darkeys that disappeared the year before and nobody ever saw hair or hide of them afterwards."

"They went down the throat of the Black Devil," Jules said, referring to an overgrown alligator that was known to haunt a neighboring bayou, but whose scaly head, mossed and thickened by many waters, showed like a giant's face. Present shots from rifle and musket had no more effect than to render him more cunning and more rarely to be seen. "But Rosie would never go so far as the bayou; more likely she's dropped asleep over her play under some pecan tree, but you must search for her, even if the ghostly terror that overpowers his sister's face at the mention of the alligator."

In an hour they had searched the open woods for half a mile around, making them echo with the child's name, and looking carefully for little tracks, which they found in plenty around the house and in the paths that branched out to the bank of the little stream close to the child's grapevine swing. But the tiny thread of water was so shallow to drown even five-year-old Rosie, who often waded in it ankle deep. The brother and sister now carefully followed its course for several hundred yards up and down the bank, but they were in search of the little bare feet they were in search of.

The nearest neighbors lived a mile away, but Maline had a faint hope that the child had gone to the house of one of these—a hope that was disappointed when they reached the first cabin, where the cows were grazing and the children and dogs were fighting over the former's supper of clabber and bread poured into a cotton-wood trough in the yard, to be scooped up with wooden spoons and dirty palms.

But if these people had rough exteriors, their hearts were tender, and they pointed at once with keen interest and pity at the story that orphan Rosie was missing. Remembering their own little Pierre, who went out last year to gather dewberries and never was heard of afterward, the Verne turned out their whole capable force, male and female, and followed by a small army of dogs, and intending to collect pine knots, as soon as it became dusk, and continue the search until the lost was found.

They went at once to the bayou, and divided so as to search both for foot-prints and for signs of the child. In a little while they were joined by other neighbors and formed themselves into a cordon, searching the woods in every direction within a circuit of several miles around Rosie's home. No wild beasts other than the howling coyotes and opossums were known to lurk in the neighborhood, but the party of searchers stopped long and held their flaming torches of resinous pine over the deep, black water-hole under a steep, overhanging bank, where the alligator caught the Black Devil's eye as the day advanced, and the cordon gradually narrowed until, as the sun rose, they stood before the lost child's cabin home, still and smokeless, and with no sign of life about it. Again the woods rang with the name they had echoed so often to ring the night, and they were ready to ring the child might have returned during the night and laid down to sleep in her own little bed.

But the bed was unoccupied, the little room empty, and Rosie's wooden doll lying on the floor, brought a fresh pang to the girl, who had been with her sister up to the little one since their parents died.

The searching party went to their homes to refresh themselves hastily with food before setting out again upon their hunt. Jules went with them, but Maline shook her head and went alone at the cabin. Unable to be quiet, she went again to all the favorite resorts of Rosie, and carefully went over every foot of ground around her little home. Then, wretched and worn out with fatigue, she threw

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Half frantic she ran towards home, hugging the little bonnet to her breast; but when she heard the gallop of a horse, she stopped still and met her Texas lover with the stern, white face of the accuser. "This is her bonnet. I found it at the bayou and your tracks by it. You drowned her. God's curses upon you!" "Maline, are you crazy? What do you mean? Where did you find that?" "Down at the bayou, where I saw her, and I cannot find you. The double ash tree and the old mill-wheel. I saw your tracks there."

"I fished there two days ago, and waited for the alligator to rise. I've never seen eyes on the child since I saw her standing at your side yesterday. I told you what I said about her was nothing but idle breath. I didn't mean a word of it. I was mad because you refused to go with me and said your duty was to the children; but God knows I wouldn't have hurt a hair of the child's head for the world. Tell me how you came you to go to the big ash just now?"

"Black Kountz, the conjurer-master, told me to go there, and that I should find signs."

"The Texan gave a low whistle, stopped and listened. Then, muttering, he proceeded to throw more pine-knots on the fire, and to hang over a pot he had filled with water. Then he took a large knife from the shelf and began to sharpen it. Every now and then he turned to glare at the child, who sat in a stupid stare in her chair, her dilated eyes like that of a bird or squirrel charmed by a snake. He tried the edge of the knife, and seemed satisfied that it was sharp; then, thrusting it in his bosom, he took up the snake, wound it around his neck, and struck it with a stick in a circle before the child with his eyes fixed upon her, and drawing gradually nearer until he paused and stretched out one hand, while with the other he drew out the knife from his breast.

"The poor victim sat like a charmed bird or a lamb beneath the butcher's hand, his eyes fixed on the terrible face, now full of the carnivorous ferocity and eagerness of the beast that scents blood. But before the blow descended, the murderer was startled from his anticipated feast by a heavy crash upon the door from the axe that Karise had caught sight of in the gloom of the doorway. Another heavy blow and the door was burst open and the Texan leaped in and darted for the conjurer, who, with his black braced against the wall, stood at bay, the big knife brandished in his hand, a dull, desperate glare in his reptile eye, and Karise, who was the latter advanced upon him, and made a lunge at his breast; but the Texan caught the knife by a dexterous movement, and twisting it from the black's clutch sent it whirling to the other end of the hut. The next instant the cannibal felt the cold muzzle of a revolver in the back of his head, and he dropped on his knees gibbering for mercy.

With his teeth clenched and breathing hard with disgust and indignation, Karise drew a stout dagger from his pocket and tied the wretch securely, fastening his feet and hands together. When this was done, he turned to the child, who sat where she had been placed rigid and motionless as a corpse. He took her in his arms and kissed her.

"Are you hurt anywhere, Rosie?—are you scared out of your wits, poor little one? You are safe now; you shall go in' on an old buck at day-break; and first thing to be done, off must go those bones," he said, pulling off her boots and depositing them by the tree where his horse was fastened.

Then he set out for Kountz's hut, steering his course through the darkness with the judgment of a trained backwoodsman that almost paralyzed her senses into hopelessness. Still, as yet she had no guide home. When he had crept cautiously close to it, and gone stealthily around it, he saw that there was no crack through which could be seen the light of the fire that was sure to be burning inside. Winter or summer the fire was never allowed to die out on the African's hearth; but except the smoke from the low chimney, no sign of it was to be seen outside the windowless hut, whose smallest crack and cranny the African hastened to stop with rags or cotton and plaster over with mud. Hid behind the moss-hung limbs of the oak, Karise saw the door and began to tug at it, and, muttering to himself:

"Black night; good, jolly night—rain 'torm, maybe; jolly night!"

With a sinister chuckle, he closed the door and fastened it, rattling the heavy chain in which the padlock was hooked. Karise crept around to the rear of the cabin, and taking out her senses into the yard, she began to tug at the clay that was chinked between the logs of the wall, and was now somewhat softened by the recent rain. Noiselessly, cautiously he worked until he had cut through a section of the clay several inches square. This plug he gradually drew out, using the utmost care to prevent attracting the attention of the black doctor. In this he was abetted by the noise of the wind that blew fiercely at intervals, and made the limbs of the live-oak creak and sway against the roof of the cabin. The plug was removed, and still kneeling, Karise applied his eye to the aperture and saw the wizard smoking his pipe and muttering to himself before the fire. Presently he rose, walked to the door, bent down and listened attentively.

"Wind blowin' hard—mighty dark—torch can't live a minute—white fools gone home—let 'em go—good, jolly night for good supper—ugh!"

He chuckled and smacked his lips; then, walking up to the screech-owl, he touched its muffled head, when, fluttering its feathers with a shivering motion, the creature uttered its weird, ghostly cry, and the black wizard, nodded and laughed hideously, showing his double row of teeth. Then, turning round to the greasy old chest, he proceeded to draw it from its place, and from the part of the dirt floor where it had stood, to tuck up the square hole, and to slip a trail-rope for the conjurer let himself down into the hole it had covered, and when he again emerged, scrambling up with difficulty what seemed to be a ladder-like step, he had something thrown over his shoulder that made the Texas heart leap and his breath come quick. It was the body of a child—the dead body, as Karise thought at first, but when the negro placed his burden on a seat against the wall, she sat there propped by her support and he saw that it was Rosie. Her little, delicate face was white as that of a corpse, her eyes were dilated and staring, and all knowledge of the world was fixed in her under a spell, upon the face of the negro.

"Don't you dar to hallow or speak one word," he said, thrusting his hideous features close to her. "If you do this snake will jump right on you and twist itself round your neck and bite you right in the eye. You see him, eh?"

As he spoke he lifted the head of the large, stuffed rattlesnake that had hung by the door, and which was now curled in a stool in front of the child.

Her gaze of fascinated terror turned upon the horrible reptile, whose coils, when she opened her jaws were horribly like. "Why you no eat de pap I carry down to you?" demanded the negro in his guttural utterance; "nice pap, wid bog-grease in it; and I carry down light for you, and all. You get to eat now? Come."

He took a teacup from the shelf and tried to force a spoonful of the soft mess it contained into the child's mouth. "Eat; it'll be de best for you. Well, you won't, and dat's de end of it. Nebber'll fatten, sure. Ef dat been 'possum cotch now, an' put in barrel an' fatten in dis time, but white chile to pound. He won't eat; get poorer, tiddy fatter. Well, ef dey won't eat, dey'll have to eat all de sooner—dat's all. Dis one in pretty good order. Lemme see agin."

With his great, black claws he felt of the leathery bag, and with a groan of her so hard that an involuntary exclamation of pain escaped her lips.

"Hush!" he hissed, with a horrible grimace. "Hab snake round your neck in no time."

Once more he shuffled to the door, stopped and listened. Then, muttering, he proceeded to throw more pine-knots on the fire, and to hang over a pot he had filled with water. Then he took a large knife from the shelf and began to sharpen it. Every now and then he turned to glare at the child, who sat in a stupid stare in her chair, her dilated eyes like that of a bird or squirrel charmed by a snake. He tried the edge of the knife, and seemed satisfied that it was sharp; then, thrusting it in his bosom, he took up the snake, wound it around his neck, and struck it with a stick in a circle before the child with his eyes fixed upon her, and drawing gradually nearer until he paused and stretched out one hand, while with the other he drew out the knife from his breast.

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When within a quarter of a mile of the house, they saw that it was on fire. As they drew nearer, they saw the flames bursting from the roof, and catching the old live oak and the long festoons of moss that watered in the wind like garlands of fire. Either the African, knowing his doom, had managed to roll near the hearth, and set fire to the house, or else it had caught accidentally from the wood that was left burning in the fireplace.

Before the house was quite consumed, the flames were quenched by a heavy rain, and next morning the charred logs were heaped in the manger to roll near the body of old Kountz dragged out. The hole in the dirt-floor of the hut being examined, showed that it led by a short ladder into a kind of cellar ten feet square. Here, among other things, was an old barrel, whose contents being turned out on the wet ground, proved to be human bones cleaned-picked and white—the bones of little children—among them three little skulls. The men stood and looked at them in speechless horror, and the father of Pierre Verne turned livid and staggered against a tree. The bones were buried, and the human bones cleaned-picked and white—the bones of little children—among them three little skulls. The men stood and looked at them in speechless horror, and the father of Pierre Verne turned livid and staggered against a tree. 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