

PLAYING 'POSSUM

ADDIE McGRATH LEE.

PART I.

The pine needles rustled with that cadence peculiar to them under Neryv Dixon's feet as she made her way slowly up the hill. Haste had no place in her vocabulary, for there had been no occasion for hurrying in all her life. She had been in search of an adventurous hen, who had disdained the hay nests in the shed in the shed loft, and "went-a-settin'" in a hollow log down in the woods on her own account. Neryv's brown apron held nine fluffy chicks, while the mother hen with outstretched wings, fluttered here and there, squaking distractedly, taking sudden fright and scurrying into the woods, then returning with defiant air and the proud cluck of proprietorship.

"Seems like yer could sense that I wasn't goin' to hurt 'em," she remarked to the distressed hen, "I'd let 'em raise out if the varmint's wouldn't pester 'em, but it ain't no use to think yer could do better by 'em than me."

The girl stepped lightly over the mounds formed by Titan groves of forest trees, going straight through the aisles of pine trees to the arch of light beyond what looked like the golden gateway of a brighter world, but was only her father's clearing after all, where the sunlight fell unbroken at noonday, and threw lengthened shadows daily from the woods from east to west and from west to east. A forty-acre clearing that gave

evidence of its shiftless proprietor by its unburnt logs and brush heaps, and by the briars and weeds that grew apace with the straggling corn. A plowshare lay rusting in the ground where Jerry's son Lode had turned his last furrow in the spring. It seemed a pity to have mutilated the heart of the forest for such results. Jerry and Lode were averse to labor of any kind, particularly to that heroic sort called "deadening timber" and "log rollin'," and had not extended their clearing further than was actually necessary for a bare sustenance. The great beech trees standing just outside a straggling rail fence, of the antiquated "stake and rider" order and ceased to whisper its alarms to the pines and oaks that stood in straight limbed loveliness all over the hills down to the bayou. The blackberry, leading a host of riotous vines and brambles, had clamored down the fence and was in undisputed possession of its corners. In the early spring of every year there were tremors of fear among woodland things lest Jerry Dixon should extend the unsightly clearing, but the fears were unfounded, for the Dixons had each, rather sit upon the banks of the bayou and cast a line for the elusive "goggle-eyed" than open new fields for labor. No thought of her father's shiftlessness crossed Neryv's mind, for she had always lived in an atmosphere of poverty and neglect, and it had no

surprising phases for her. What did surprise her was the sight of a horse and rider coming through the woods from the direction from which she had come.

"Who kin it be anyhow!" she ejaculated, trying to trace some points of recognition at a distance. As is usual in rural districts, the horse came in for first consideration. "The creeter do look powerfully like the one Jim Johnson rid to meetin', but it ain't gaited like it were, as I kin see."

But she had no idea of leaving her curiosity ungratified, and waited for the approach of the rider.

"He ain't from these parts," she concluded, and the discovery seemed to overwhelm her with confusion, for she stood gazing at the ground, digging her bare toes into the mellow surface, and with her disengaged hand she twitched nervously at the strings of her sun bonnet, that hung limp over her back, not doing duty as a headgear on this occasion.

John Morrison was too tired, dusty and thirsty, and withal too practical to be susceptible to artistic impressions, else the "study in browns" would have been deemed worthy of more than the glance that interrogated, not the girl in meagre brown cotton dress, sun-bonnet, whose shapely feet, sunburnt face took on the same warm, brown color, but a living creature who only meant to him a source from which to derive the information he desired in regard to the timbered lands through which he had just passed.

"Good morning," he said removing his hat.

"Howdy!" returned the girl, still

looking down, and it was not until his gaze went beyond her over toward the log house that stood on the opposite side of the clearing in the shadow of the pines that Neryv dared look up. One swift wondering glance told her he was unlike the men she was accustomed to see around the settlement and placed him under that comprehensive and exalted category known as "town folks."

"Can you tell me who lives here?" he asked.

"Over yonder?" she indicated the direction of the house with her head. "Jerry Dixon," steadily looking down.

"Is he at home?" asked Morrison.

"Not as I knows on, 'less he's got back since I left ther."

"Could you tell me where I'd be likely to find him?"

"Ther ain't no tellin'; like ez not he'll come ter dinner, and like ez not he won't. Yer ain't er wantin' ter see him ar' yer?" Neryv looked suspiciously at the stranger, and her wander grew that any man should desire to see her father "on business," as the stranger explained; she had never known the like to occur before.

"You could go to ther house an' light, an' wait fer him if yer kav' a mind to," said Neryv, her hospitality banishing shyness, an' put yer critter under the shed—ther's corn in the shuck pen," she added.

"Thank you," the young man returned, and dismounting, prepared to lead his jaded horse to the point designated. The girl walked ahead in her characteristic indolent way, pausing to utter a fierce "shoo e, shoo e!" at the adventurous hen whose chicks she held in her apron, and once she stopped to watch a squirrel scamper up the trunk of a tree.

"Is game plentiful hereabout?" asked Morrison, with an effort at conversation.

"Them ar' and ther's a big chance of varmint's," she answered without looking at him.

The house when reached was not unlike the majority of those in that section, a two-room structure of pine logs, notched and fitted together, the crevices filled in with a mixture of mud and moss, the chimney of this same compound reared its ungainly proportions against one end and seemed a pillar to support the cabin that possessed an oblique slant in that direction. A long handled gourd, serene and brown, hung near the door, a sample of last year's product of a vine that raged rampant over the fence and shed in the rear of the house. A clambering tyrannical vine "that wouldner growed so fine ef gourds were fitten to eat," as Neryv often declared. She deposited her chicks in a coop by the shed while John Morrison put up his horse. "I'll fetch some cool water from the spring fer yer," said she, in a cordial though smileless way, "an' yer make yerself at home," bringing out a chair on the rickety porch, but Morrison picked up the bucket from the shelf near the steps before she could reach it, saying: "Tell me the direction of the spring and I'll bring the water myself."

This unexpected move caused Neryv to remonstrate, "I ain't never called on company to tote water yit"—but Morrison only laughed and started off on a footpath that led back into the woods, surmising that the spring was in that direction.

Jerry Dixon's world was narrow, but he never grew restless because of its close drawn limits. He knew nothing of the glorious arena stretching away beyond his boundaries, he knew nothing of the world, for the throbbing of its great heart had never stirred the pulses of this remote settlement that was hemmed in on one side by the D'Arbonne bayou, with its margin of swamp, a stream that at unexpected times swelled above its channel, spreading over the swamps and impeding travel. Jerry's world focussed into three points—the bayou, Hudson's store, and the cabin in the

clearing. He reached the latter point that August day as John Morrison laved his face, bravely contending with the disadvantage of scooping up the cool water in his hands from a shallow pewter basin on the water shelf. Whatever surprise he felt on seeing a stranger domiciled in his abode he gave no sign, probably he felt none, for that emotion was too rapid to stir his sluggish pulse.

"Hyar yer?" he said gravely, then turning to Neryv who was washing sweet potatoes, making ready for the noonday meal.

"Whar's Lode?"

"Dunno; down at the ferry like az not."

Young Morrison, having finished his ablutions, turned to Jerry and shook hands in a friendly manner, saying:

"Mr. Dixon, my name is Morrison, John Morrison. I was prospecting through this section, have been buying up white oaks, and have learned at the settlement that you had a well there and came to find out of you timbered strip of land on the bayou cared to sell any of your white oak timber."

Jerry Dixon's equanimity was not to be disturbed by this rapid way of coming to business, and he answered in his usual deliberate way:

"All of them trees ar' mine down 'twixt here and the bayou, and ther's a sight of white oaks 'mongst 'em.

What do yer want white oaks fur more'n red oak or water or pin oak? I'm got 'em all kinds on that strip."

"I have only been buying white oak timber; it suits my purpose better than any other, and if you care to sell I'd like to know your figures."

Jerry had no idea of transacting business in a standing position nor of showing an undue haste lest the stranger might fancy him anxious to sell. He motioned his guest to the chair Neryv had placed on the porch, seated himself on a wooden settle, drawing from his pocket his cob pipe.

"Minervy," he called, "bring me a chunk of fire," he always called her by her full name when laboring under strong emotions. The girl appeared carrying a glowing ember between two sticks, flourishing it appallingly near her father's immovable countenance, while placing it on his pipe.

After several moments of smoke enveloped reflections, Jerry said:

"I never knowed as white oak trees were enny better'n other sort ov trees."

"Perhaps their general utility is not greater than other timber, but I am getting them for a special purpose. They are worked up into staves for making wine casks. I have a great deal of timber floated down the bayou and I am anxious to get all out before a low stage of water. I have my men a few miles above here

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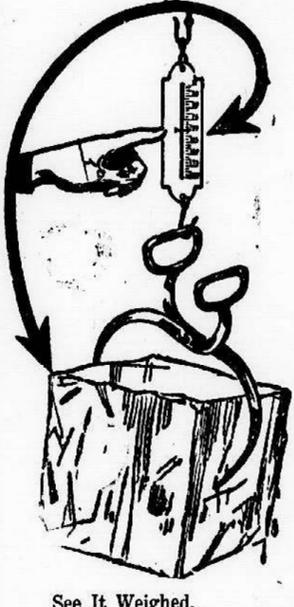
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