

VOODOOISM IN TENNESSEE.

DID the sun really shine more brilliantly upon the old plantation home in those ante-bellum days than it does now? Did the perennial-blooming shrubs smell sweeter, the birds have a gladder note? Perhaps not, yet the day on which occurred the strange instance of Voodoo superstition I wish to recall was more beautiful than any that seem to bless the earth now, while it was only one of many such that I remember at Beechwood Hall.

My husband, Colonel Park, was absent. Mother and I were together, ostensibly sewing, but for the most part sitting with folded hands, enjoying through the open window the freshness of a May morning. Honeysuckles swayed into the casement with free gifts of fragrance. Outside were acres of greensward and sunshine, bounded by the tender green of the forests. In the vivid blue depths above sailed a lazy crow, supplying with his "caw, caw," the discord needed to complete the harmony of the song-birds. Beneath him the young corn rows checkered the brown fields. The theme of the day's melody was peace. Peace lay in the long shadows of the old apple orchard upon the sloping knoll. Everywhere were rest and quietude, when the door opened, and tall Eliza stood before us, with a troubled expression upon her face.

She was a confidential servant through whom I generally communicated my wishes to the other negroes, and was always the messenger to bring me news of importance from the "quarters." Her grave features were unusually solemn as she said:—

"Miss Sallie, I come to tell you Etta's mighty bad off. De gal's plum wore out, an' Uncle Jack's done sent for dat Voodoo woman."

Instantly aroused from my beautiful dream of peace, I questioned Eliza anxiously.

"What is the matter with her?"

"Etta's done tricked," she replied. "She spent last night a-crawlin' under de house huntin' fur de vial what's got de Voodoo medicine in it. She done wore herself out, an' she's layin' on de bed pantin' like a lizard. She say she gwine die. Her daddy come over from his marster's dis mornin', an' he done sent fur de Voodoo woman, to see if she can't do nothin' fur her. An' I did n't want no such goin's-on in my house while Mars James was gone, lessen you knowed it."

"Who is this Voodoo woman, Eliza, and where does she come from?"

"Hush, Miss Sallie, honey; she hyers every word we says right now. She don't 'low nobody to name her. She say she ain't got father nor mother, an' nobody don't know whar she come from nor whar she's a-goin' to."

"Why do they send for this mysterious person to cure Etta? What do they imagine has made her sick?"

"Dey 'lows ole Aunt Sue's tryin' to conjure her. De gal's 'feard to eat anythin', an' she's starvin' herself to death. Sometimes she snatches a bite o' what comes from de white folks' table before ole Sue has a chance to do sump'n' to it. I done talked to her an' talked to her, but I can't do nothin' wid her. Her mammy says Aunt Sue been goin' down steady till Etta was took, an' now she look like she gwine live anudder hundred years."

I interrupted a little impatiently:—

"Eliza, I don't in the least understand you. Martha knows better than that. This is nonsense you are telling me."

"No, 't ain' nonsense, Miss Sallie. Ain' you' gran'pa done tole you ole Sue

was gittin' to be a ole woman when he was a little boy? How do she live so long 'thout she sucks young folks's blood while dey 's'sleep? De chillun dies, an' she keeps on a-livin'."

"Oh," said I, "you surely can't believe that, for the poor old creature has not been able to stir from her door for years."

"Shucks, Miss Sallie, she don' need no foots to walk wid at night. Peter Sladen 'lows she can travel faster 'n a bird can fly. He seen her standin' in de door one night, wid big black wings to her shoulders, same as a bat, an' she riz right up in de a'r an' was gone clean out o' sight in a minute. He seed her wid his own eyes. By nex' mornin' Mary Billy's baby was dead, an' ole Sue was hoppin' around pearter 'n common." Dropping her voice almost to a whisper, she added, "I always 'lowed she had somethin' to do wid Jerry's death."

Jerry was Eliza's son, who had died very suddenly of something like sunstroke the previous summer. To divert her mind from a memory that always clouded her face with the melancholy of mania, I arose, saying, "Come with me, Eliza. We will talk to Sue, and then I will see Etta."

She followed me to the door of the cabin of the old woman, who had been an unprofitable charge upon the plantation for a quarter of a century, but I could not get her to go inside. I entered alone; and the moment I spoke to her, the wretched old centenarian, a mere bundle of bones and clothes in the chimney corner, began to mumble and chatter. The cob pipe dropped unheeded from her blue gums, and would have set fire to her dress but for the nimbleness of the pickaninny who had the care of her. She raised her skinny claws (they had ceased to resemble hands) protestingly, and the wrinkled black skin of her face fell pendulous from the bone as she wagged her head to and fro, saying: —

"Don' come here pesterin' me, chile. De Lawd knows I ain' done nothin' to de gal. Send fur Dr. Davi'son. Dey says I'm at de bottom of it, but de Lawd knows I ain' done nothin'." The filmy sightless eyes rolled about restlessly, vainly seeking mine as she urged her innocence. "Send fur Dr. Davi'son," she repeated. "He'll tell you dere ain' nothin' de matter wid de gal."

Putting her head in the door-way, Eliza said: —

"Law, Miss Sallie, don' trust to dat. Doctors don' know ev'ything. Doctors ain' Gawd A'mighty."

Turning to the hideous living mummy, I said, —

"You need n't be uneasy, Aunt Sue. I shall have the whole matter carefully investigated. No one shall hurt you, if you have done nothing wrong."

"De Lawd blesh you, honey, you's de ve'y spit o' you' gran'pa. He would n't never let 'em hurt ole Sue, poor ole Sue, — ole Sue, poor ole Sue."

We left her muttering "poor ole Sue," which was often her refrain for hours at a time. As we walked down the lane between the houses in the quarters, on our way to Eliza's cabin, the girl kept so close behind me that I felt sure she had the folds of my dress tightly grasped in her hand; and her voice was quavering with ill-suppressed fear as she whispered, —

"Folks says she's talkin' to de ole boy, when she carries on like dat."

"Eliza," said I, "are you really and truly afraid of Aunt Sue?"

"Naw 'm, I ain' 'feard of her. I w'ars red pepper in my shoes."

"Red pepper? What for?"

"To keep her from hurtin' me, Miss Sallie."

"Where did you get such an idea?"

"Shoo, Miss Sallie, I be'n knowin' dat sence I was a young gal. 'T was a party give by de Mayberry darkies. We was all dancin' a break-down, an' de planks shuck under our foots powerful,

an' et de clouds o' dust fly out 'tel we could n't see 'cross de room. Some nigger sneeze right loud, den 'nudder somebody, den 'nudder, 'tel you could n' hyer yer yers fur de sneezin'. I sez, 'Mr. Frierson' (Tom Frierson was my partner), 'dere must be pepper in dis house somewhars.' 'Yes,' he sez, 'I'm w'arin' it in my shoes.' 'What you w'arin' it in yer shoes for?' sez I. Sez 'e, 'I w'ars it to keep a ole conjure nigger from hurtin' me. He kep' a-workin' on me 'tel he got a needle in my leg. Dat needle bothered me 'bout a year. Sometimes it would come through de skin, an' I done my best to catch holt uv it an' pull it out; but jes' as soon as I lay my hands on it, it was gone ev'y time. Den I put red pepper in my shoes an' a silver dime 'tween my toes, an' I ain' seen dat needle sence.'"

By this time we had reached Eliza's house. Both its doors, which were opposite, were wide open. To the right was the fireplace, with a few smouldering sticks in it, over which swung a pot attached to an old-fashioned crane. On a low bench were seated the sick girl's parents, moaning in a low, sobbing tone. In the corner near them was a neatly made bed covered with a bright patchwork quilt. The beams of the low-roofed cabin were hung with festoons of red pepper, bunches of yellow pop-corn, and strips of dried pumpkin. Here and there on the walls were wisps of pennyroyal, side by side with a lithograph of a lady with a vivid red rose and green leaves stuck in her jetty ringlets, or a highly colored fashion-plate from an early issue of *Godey's Lady's Book*. A small table near the centre of the room was set with two flowered plates, cups and saucers, and knives and forks. Another bed was against the wall opposite the fireplace, and on it lay, face upward, the negro girl, apparently in a dying condition. Her eyes were partially closed, the balls rolled back. A scant, fluttering breath came through her parted

teeth. The brown arms lay straight on either side.

"Etta, what is the matter with you?" I asked.

She did not answer me. I took one of her hands and stroked it gently. It was clammy, and the palm was ashen-colored.

"Speak to me, Etta. I want to help you. If you would like to see the Voodoo woman, she shall come to you."

The lids lifted tremblingly from the glazed eyes. With a painful effort she gasped out:—

"It's my only—chance—Miss Sallie. I'm goin' to die. All last night—I was crawlin'—under de house—huntin' fur de vial. De cork 's out—de stuff 's 'most gone. As soon as it's gone I'm goin'—goin'. Dere ain't much left—I'm"—

The motion of the lips ceased, the eyelids fell, and only an occasional pulsation in the wrist showed that any life was left in the limp form. In the intense stillness that oppressed the next few moments I caught the sound of approaching wheels. I went to the door, and, shading my eyes with my hand from the outside glare, saw rattling down the lane a shackling little old cart, driven by the sick girl's small brother, Buster. His legs protruded like black sticks from under his one white garment. With his whip (merely a hickory handle and a leather string) he was belaboring a little gray mule into a trot that jerked the wheels until they seemed to run each in a separate track, and sometimes almost under the centre of the wagon.

"There comes the woman," I said to those in the room.

"Thank Gawd fur dat, Miss Sallie," came at the same moment from Martha and her husband, neither of whom had said a word up to that time, but had remained bent forward, looking downward, and groaning at regular intervals.

I watched the approach of the wob-

bling wheels that finally stopped in front of the house. From the wagon descended two remarkable-looking persons, a man and a woman. He, a very tall negro, with thick African lips and woolly hair, was dressed in cloth as black as his skin. The woman was a delicate light mulattress, of reddish tinge. An oval face, regular features, and large, brilliant black eyes gave her singular beauty. She wore no hat or bonnet, but around her head was twined a turban of bright hues, Madras yellow predominating. Large hoop earrings hung from her ears, and a string of blue beads was twined round and round her throat, and fell in festoons, longer and longer, until they touched the waist of her white tunic. Beads were also wound about her arms, which the loose sleeves left bare. Beneath her skirt of dull indigo blue, which did not conceal her well-turned ankles, her exquisitely formed bare feet were seen, which carried her lightly, yet with great dignity of bearing, into the house. Her companion followed most respectfully, while the boy hitched the mule. I retreated to the fireplace, and stood watching with amazed interest. The parents did not stir. They did not even look up. Eliza turned her back, and sat on the further door-sill, looking out. The woman took no notice of any of us, but advanced into the room towards the patient on the bed. Her eyes assumed a steadfast expression as she fastened them upon the girl. After a long space of breathless silence, in which she continued her fixed gaze, her eyes scintillated with an influence that pervaded the room, and seemed to subject all other volition to her own will.

She concentrated her attention upon Etta. A quiver ran through the girl's frame; her eyes flew open with a startled gaze. The woman drew back four or five steps with a hasty but most graceful movement, still looking intently into the eyes of the sick girl. Her body swayed to and fro. Keeping time to

its rhythmic motion, she chanted slowly a weird, fantastic, barbaric air, unlike anything I had ever heard. The words were in a foreign tongue. The undulations of her body brought her near enough to touch the girl upon the shoulder, upon whom the effect was electrical. Again a shiver ran through her frame, and she looked intently upon the Voodoo woman, as, changing the air, she chanted in a low, sweet key that sounded like a staccato wind beating upon an Æolian harp:—

"You loved him! You loved him! He's gone!"

Then a pause followed, filled only with the throbbing pulse in my ears. Again she sang:—

"He's gone! He went to the fields! While there he worked! He worked! He put his hands to his head, and said, 'I'm sick'!"

At this Eliza rose from her seat on the door-sill, and turned. Through it all the poor father and mother did not look up, but made a low moaning and sobbing that fitted into the chant like a minor accompaniment, and so excited my nerves that I could not restrain the tears from rolling down my face. The woman continued:—

"It is *this* that ails you, and not the medicine in the vial! The old woman *did* try to trick you! The vial *is* under the house! But it will not be emptied! I have sent it back to where it came from! It has gone down, down! It has gone to *him*!" and she pointed to the floor. "It's gone now," she repeated, introducing a soothing note into the song. "That is not what ails you. You loved him, and he's dead! He's dead!" Here the song was a wail.

Eliza, who was listening with strained attention, threw her arms above her head, cried out in a piercing voice, "It's true! It's true! It was my son, and he's dead, he's gone!" and fell across the foot of the bed, burying her face in the bed-clothes.

The strange woman passed her hand over Etta's brow two or three times, raised it, and, stepping back three or four steps, said, in a voice of command, —

"Arise!"

The girl arose.

With hand still up, the woman continued to walk backward to the door, her eyes still riveted on the girl, saying, —

"Follow — follow — follow."

Etta left her bed and followed.

When the woman reached the door, she threw one concentrated look upon the girl, following her as if impelled by an invisible power, and then turned and went out of the door. She ran lightly up the street, retraced her steps down the other side of the houses, making the circuit of the quarters, and came back into the house, followed still by the panting girl.

When she entered the house she looked at me for the first time, and said in an altogether different voice, though it was gentle and calm: —

"She is well now, Mrs. Park. There will be no more trouble about her."

It startled me to hear my name from

her lips, for I was sure she had never before seen me, and was not expecting to meet me when she arrived. Moreover, no one had spoken to me since her entrance. While I was pondering this and all I had witnessed within the hour, the tall man approached her, and very tenderly placed his arm around her waist. It was timely support, as I at once saw she would have fallen to the floor without it. Her eyes were slowly closing, and her body was utterly relaxed.

"She must sleep," said the man. "She always sleeps after one of these spells."

I motioned him to follow me with the light burden of her body, which he had already taken into both his strong arms. I led the way to another cabin, where she was laid upon a bed, and rested in a heavy, motionless sleep for hours, after which, as I was told by Martha, she ate heartily at their table. As the cock crew for midnight she arose, and went unquestioned to her mysterious home.

Etta's recovery was as complete as it was sudden, and I never heard anything more of her queer malady.

S. M. P.

FLOWERS AND FOLKS.

EVERY order of intelligent beings naturally separates the world into two classes, — itself and the remainder. Birds, for instance, have no doubt a feeling, more or less clearly defined, which, if it were translated into human speech, might read, "Birds and nature." We, in our turn, say, "Man and nature." But such distinctions, useful as they are, and therefore admissible, are none the less arbitrary and liable to mislead. Birds and men are alike parts of nature, having many things

in common not only with each other, but with every form of animate existence. The world is not a patchwork, though never so cunningly put together, but a garment woven throughout.

The importance of this truth, its far-reaching and many-sided significance, is even yet only beginning to be understood; but its bearing upon the study of what we call natural history would seem to be evident. My own experience as a dabbler in botany and ornithology has convinced me that the pursuit of