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Dolly

AN IDYL OF THE LEVEE

LAFCADIO HEARN

"The Lord only," once observed Officer Patsy Brazil, "knows what Dolly's real name is."

Dolly was a brown, broad-shouldered girl of the levee, with the lithe strength of a pantheress in her compactly-knit figure, and owning one of those peculiar faces which at once attract and puzzle by their very uniqueness—a face that possessed a strange comeliness when viewed at certain angles, especially half-profile, and that would have seemed very soft and youthful but for the shadow of its heavy black brows, perpetually knitted Medusa-wise, as though by everlasting pain, above a pair of great, dark, keen, steady eyes. It was a face, perhaps, rather Egyptian than aught else; fresh with a youthful roundness, and sweetened by a sensitive, passionate, pouting mouth.

Moreover, Dolly's odd deportment and peculiar attire were fancifully suggestive of those wanton Egyptian women whose portraits were limned on mighty palace walls by certain ancient and forgotten artists—some long-limbed, gauze-clad girls who seem yet to move with a snakish and fantastic grace; others, strong-limbed and deep-bosomed, raimented in a single, close-fitting robe, and wearing their ebon hair loosely flowing in a long thick mass. Dolly appeared to own the elfish grace of the former, together with the more mortal form of the latter. She must have made her own dresses, for no such dresses could have been purchased with love or with money, they were very antique and very graceful. Her favorite dress, a white robe, with a zig-zag border of purple running around the bottom, fitted her almost closely from shoulder to knee, following the sinuous outline of her firm figure, and strongly recalling certain pictures in the Egyptian Department of a famous German work upon the Costumes of Antiquity. Of course Dolly knew nothing of Antiquity or of Egypt—in fact she could neither read nor write; but she had an instinctive esthetic taste which

surmounted those obstacles to good taste in dress which ignorance and fashion jointly create. Her prehistoric aspect was further heightened by her hair,—long, black, thick as a mane, and betraying by its tendency to frizzle the strong tinge of African blood in Dolly's veins. This she generally wore loose to the waist,—a mass so heavy and dense that a breeze could not wave it, and so deeply dark as to recall those irregular daubs of solid black paint whereby the painters of the pyramid-chambers represented the locks of weird court dames. Dolly was very careful of this strange hair; but she indulged, from time to time, in the savage luxury of greasing it with butter. Occasionally, too, she arranged it in a goblin sort of way, by combing it up perpendicularly, so that it flared above her head as though imbued with an electric life of its own. Perhaps she inherited the tendency to these practices from her African blood.

In fact, Dolly was very much of a little savage, despite the evidences of her natural esthetic taste in dress. The very voluptuousness and freedom of her movements had something savage about it, and she had a wild love for violent physical exercises. She could manage a pair of oars splendidly, and was so perfect a shot that knowing steamboatmen were continually fleecing newcomers by inducing them to bet heavily against Dolly's abilities in the Sausage Row shooting gallery. Turning her back to the mark, with a looking-glass hung before her, Dolly could fire away all day, and never miss making the drum rattle. Then she could swim like a Tahitian, and before daybreak on sultry summer mornings often stole down to the river to strike out in the moon-silvered current. "Ain't you ashamed to be seen that way?" reproachfully inquired an astonished police officer, one morning, upon encountering Dolly coming up the levee, with a single wet garment clinging about her, and wringing out the water from her frizzly hair.

"Only the pretty moon saw me," replied Dolly, turning her dark eyes gratefully to the rich light.

Dolly was a much better character, on the whole, than her sisters of the levee, chiefly because she seldom quarreled, never committed theft, and seldom got tipsy. Smoke she did, incessantly; for tobacco is a necessity of life on the Row. It was an odd fact that she had no confidants, and never talked about herself. Her reticence, comparative sobriety, and immunity from arrest,

together with the fact that she never lacked money enough for the necessities of life, occasioned a peculiar, unpleasant feeling toward her among the other women, which expressed itself in the common saying that Dolly was "putting on airs." Once it became suddenly fashionable on the Row to adorn windows with pots containing some sort of blossoming weed, which these dusky folks euphemistically termed "flowers." Dolly at once "put on airs" by refusing to conform to the growing custom.

"Why don't you have any flower-pots in your window?" curiously queried Patsy Brazil.

"Because," said Dolly, "I ain't a-going to be so d—d mean to the flowers. The Row ain't no place for flowers."

One of her greatest pleasures was to pet a little bandy-legged negro child, whose parents nobody knew, and whom old fat Maggie Sperlock had adopted. She would spend whole hours amusing the little fellow, romping and laughing with him, and twisting her extraordinary hair into all sorts of fantastic horns and goblin devices in order to amuse him. Then she taught him the names of all the great white boats, and the names of the far cities they sailed from, and the odd symbolism of the negro steamboat slang. When a long vessel swept by, plowing up the yellow current in curving furrows about her prow, and leaving in her rear a long line of low-hanging nimbus-clouds, Dolly would cry: "See, Tommy, how proud the old gal is to-day; she's got a fine *ruffle* on. Look at her *switch*, Tommy; see how the old gal's curling her hair out behind her." Dolly could not read the names of the boats, but she knew by heart their gleaming shapes, and the varying tones of their wild, deep voices. So she taught the child to know them, too, until to his infantile fancy they became, as it were, great aquatic things, which slept only at the levee, and moved upon the river through the white moonlight with an awfully pulsating life of their own. She likewise made out of a pine plank for Tommy, a funny little vessel, with a cunning stern-wheel to it, which flung up the water bravely as the child drew it along the shore with a cotton string. And Dolly had no end of terrible stories to tell Tommy, about Voodoos—she called them "hoodoos"—people who gathered heads of snakes, and spiders, and hideous creeping things to make venomous charms with, by steeping them in whisky until the foul liquor became "green as grass."

Tommy would have become frightened out of his little life at these tales, but that Dolly gave him a dried rabbit's foot in a bag to hang round his neck; for Dolly, like all the colored folks of the levee, believed a rabbit's foot to be a sure charm against all evil.

Of course Dolly had "her man"—a rather good-looking yellow roustabout known along the levee as Aleck. In the summer time, when the river was "lively," as the steamboatmen say, she was rather faithful to Aleck; but when the watery highway was all bound in ice, and there was no money on the Row, and Aleck was away on the Lower Mississippi or perhaps out of work, Dolly was decidedly immoral in her mode of life. But Aleck could scarcely expect her to be otherwise, for his money went almost as fast as it came. It was generally a feast or a famine with him. He did come home one spring with forty-odd dollars in his pocket—quite a fortune, he thought it, and a new silver watch for Dolly; but that was, perhaps, the great pecuniary event of his career. Somehow or other the watch did not keep perfect time, and poor Dolly, who knew far more about steamboats than she did about watches, opened the chronometer "to see what was the matter with it."

"Why, it's got a little hair wound around its guts," said Dolly; "of course it won't go right." Then she pulled out the mainspring. "Such a doggoned funny looking hair," further observed Dolly.

Unlike the other women of the levee, however, Dolly had a little respect for her own person, and did not sell her favors indiscriminately. On the contrary, she managed for a long time to maintain a certain comparative reputation for respectability. And when she did, at last, become utterly abandoned, perhaps the Great Father of each one of us, black and white, fully pardoned all her poor errors.

For it came to pass in this wise: Aleck, one summer evening, became viciously drunk at a Bucktown ball, and got into a free fight, wherein one roustabout, to use Dolly's somewhat hyperbolic expression, "was shot and cut all to pieces." Aleck was only charged at the Hammond Street Police Station with being drunk and disorderly, but inasmuch as it was not his first offense of the kind, he was sentenced to pay a fine of fifty dol-

lars, and to be imprisoned in the Work-house for a period of thirty days. When the Black Maria had rolled away, and the gaping crowd of loafers had dispersed, after satisfying their unsympathetic curiosity, Dolly wandered into the City Park, and sitting down upon one of the little stone lions at the fountain, cried silently over the broken watch which Aleck had given her. She arose with the resolve to pay Aleck's fine as soon as the thirty days of his Work-house sentence had expired, and went slowly back to the Row.

Now when Dolly had fairly resolved upon doing a thing, it was generally done. We dare not say too much about how Dolly had resolved to earn that fifty dollars in thirty days—about the only way, indeed, that it was remotely possible for her to earn it on the Row. Those who know the social life of the Row will, however, understand the difficulties in Dolly's way. The sudden change in her habits, the recklessness of her life—compared with what it had been; the apparently absolute loss of all the little self-respect she once had, at once excited the surprise of her companions and of the police officers, who watch closely every habitant of the levee. She bought food only when she could not beg it, seldom paid for a cigar, and seemed to become a ubiquitous character in all the worst haunts of the Row, by night and day.

"If you keep on this way, Dolly," finally exclaimed Patsy Brazil, "I'll 'vag' you." It was then nearly thirty days since Aleck had been sentenced. Patsy, kindly but always firm, never threatened in vain, and Dolly knew it.

It is hardly necessary to say, however, that Dolly had not been able to earn the amount of Aleck's fine, nor is it necessary to state how much she had earned, when Patrolman Brazil was obliged to threaten her with the Work-house. She had one recourse left, however,—to sell her dresses and her furniture, consisting of a stove, a bed, and an ancient clock—for much less than their pitiful value. She did sell them, and returned from the second-hand store to her bare room, to fall into an exhausted sleep on the floor, hungry and supperless, but happy in the possession of enough money to pay "her man's fine." And Aleck again found himself a free man.

He felt grateful enough to Dolly not to get drunk for a

week, which he naturally considered no small piece of self-abnegation in return for his freedom. A keener-eyed man in a blue uniform with brass buttons, who looked into Dolly's great hollow eyes and sunken face with a muttered "God help her!" better understood how dearly that freedom had been purchased. Hunger and sleeplessness had sapped the vitality of Dolly's nervous though vigorous organization. At last Aleck got work on a Maysville packet boat, and sailed away from the levee, and from the ghost of what was once Dolly, waving a red, ragged handkerchief from her window in defiance of Pickett's orders. Just before the regular starting time some one had "tolled" the boat's bell.

"Who's fooling with that bell," exclaimed Dolly, suddenly dropping her cigar. "It's bad luck to do that." She often thought of the bell again, when week after week the vessel regularly steamed up to the long wharfboat—without Aleck. Aleck had told her that he intended to "see God's people"—the roustabout term for visiting one's home; but she never thought he would have remained away from her so long.

At last one evening while sitting at Pickett's door, filing some little shirt-studs for Aleck out of a well-bleached beef bone, some one told her how Aleck had got married up at Maysville, and what "a tip-top weddin'" it was. Dolly said nothing, but picked up her beef bones and her little file and went up stairs.

"They never die round here," said Patsy Brazil, "until their will's gone. The will dies first." And Dolly's will was dead.

Some women of the levee picked her thin body up from the floor of the empty room and carried her to a bed. Then they sent for old Judge Fox, the gray-haired negro preacher, who keeps a barber-shop on Sausage Row. The old negro's notions of theology were probably peculiar to himself, yet he had comforted more than one dying woman. He closed his shop at once, and came to pray and sing for Dolly, but she heeded neither the prayers nor the strange slave-hymns that he sang. The evening gray deepened to night purple; the moon looked in through the open window at Dolly's thin face; the river reflected its shining ripple on the whitewashed walls within, and through all the sound of the praying and singing there boomed up from below the furious thrumming of banjos and

bass-viols, and the wild thunder of the dancers' feet. Down stairs the musicians were playing the tune, "Big Ball Up Town;" up-stairs the women were chanting to a weirdly sweet air, "My Jesus Arose."

Oh, ain't I mighty glad my Jesus arose,
Oh, ain't I mighty glad my Jesus arose,
Oh, ain't I mighty glad my Jesus arose
To send me up on high.

Here comes my pilgrim Jesus,
A-riding a milk-white horse;
He's rode him to the east and he's rode him to the west,
And to every other quarter of the world.
Oh, ain't I mighty glad, &c.

Here comes my master Jesus,
With heaven in his view,
He's goin' home to glory,
And bids this world adieu.
Oh, ain't I mighty glad, &c.

He'll blow out the sun and burn up the world,
And turn that moon to blood,
And sinners in ——

"Hush," said Dolly, rising with a desperate effort. "Ain't that the old gal talking?"

A sound deeper and sweeter and wilder than the hymned melody or the half-savage music below, filled all the moon lit levee—the steam-song of the Maysville packet coming in.

"Help me up!" gasped Dolly—"It's the old gal blowing off steam; it's Aleck; it's my man—my man."

Then she sunk back suddenly, and lay very still—in the stillness of the Dreamless Sleep.

When they went to lay her out, they found something tightly clutched in one little bony hand—so tightly that it required no inconsiderable exertion to force the fingers open.

It was an old silver watch, with the main-spring pulled out.

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