TWO RUNAWAYS

By HARRY STILLWELL EDWARDS.

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CHAPTER I.

I have little doubt but many people in middle Georgia yet remember Crawford Worthington, who in antebellum days kept open house in Baldwin county. Major Worthington, as he was called because of some fancied aid he had extended to his country during the difficulty with Mexico, was not a type—unless to be one of many singular characters in a region whose peculiar institutions admitted of the wildest eccentricities can constitute a type. He lived in the midst of peace and plenty upon his plantation not many miles from Milledgeville, surrounded by several hundred slaves with whom he was upon singular but easy terms. His broad, rolling fields, his almost boundless pastures, his solemn fronted and tall columned house, his comfortable "quarters," where dwelt the negroes, all bespoke prosperity and independ-

"You are fixing to run away, Isam!"

ence. Independent he was. No prince ever ruled with sway more potent than this bachelor planter, surrounded by his blacks and acknowledging none other than his own will.

This marked character was a man below medium height. His figure inclined very decidedly to portliness, and beyond a long, narrow mustache and thin imperial of black and gray his face was clean shaven. Iron gray hair in abundance crept out from under the white felt hat he generally wore, and his mixed suit of gray was illumined by a ruffled shirt and broad spreading cuffs of the finest linen.

Self willed and eccentric are weak words with which to stamp this gentleman's actions. In the long days of his idleness, when the legislature was not in session, the negro was an unfailing source of amusement and study to him and his sole diversion, for he despised books from the day he left college, and beyond a sporting journal and a paper from a neighboring city he had no periodical. Of course he was a Whig.

Upon the day which I have selected to open a page in the experience of Major Crawford Worthington he was sitting upon his broad veranda, which swept back from the front around to the shady eastern exposure and overlooked the spacious back yard. Two-score pickanninies in short shirts had scrambled in front of him for small silver coins as he scattered them upon the ground beneath. The tears wrung from him by their contortions and funny postures had dried upon his cheeks, and weary of the sport he had turned away the black athletes by means of a few gourds of cold water skillfully applied to their half clad forms, had settled back to enjoy the afternoon and fell a-dreaming.

He remembered, in that easy method common to dreams, how years before he had sat upon that same porch watching a favorite old negro catching chickens in the yard. "Isam!" he had said, and moving with jerky little motions that seemed always to attune themselves to his master's moods as expressed in his tones Isam had minced up the steps.

"Isam," he had continued, "you are fixing to run away!"

He remembered the startled look that swept over the funny little man's countenance and his answer:

"Lord mussy, Mass' Craffud, who-ev'r hyah de like er dat?"

"Yes, sir, and you are fixing to start right away."

There had been genuine grief in the negro's voice as he replied:

" 'Fo' Gawd, Mass' Craffud, you dun got de wrong nigger dis time. Isam is nigh onter 50 year ole, en he ain' nev'r lef' de place on er run yet. No, sah!"

Isam, however, spurred on by the suggestion, had really run off, and the overseer had scoured the country for him in vain. The black was enjoying freedom beyond recall, but one morning while the major was breakfasting alone, and his two servants who attended the table were busy with flybrush and waffles, Isam suddenly stood in the doorway. His clothes were torn and soiled, and his face wore a hangdog look that was in truth comical. Since that day old Isam had run away annually about the same time of the year, and this without any apparent cause.

Evidently this was what the major was thinking of, for smiles came and went upon his face like shadows under the swaying mimosa. And when at last his eyes fell again upon the old negro:

"Isam!" he said, just as he had spoken years ago.

"Yes, sir," and the jerky little tones were the same.

"You are fixing to run away, Isam!"

"Me!" and again that reproachful, protesting voice.

"Yes, you; just as you have for years. You are getting ready to start. I have had my eye on you for a week. But," said the major, fixing his lips after the Worthington fashion, "I am going to know this time where you go and why you go."

There was silence a full minute; then the negro spoke:

"Mass' Craffud, deed en I dunno 'zactly how et is. Hit jes' sorter strikes me, en I'm gone 'fo' I know t. En dat's er sollum fac', sho."

"Well," said the major, "then go when it strikes you. It is a relief to get rid of you occasionally. But if you get off this time without letting me know when you start I'll cut your ca[illegible] when you come back—if I don't"——

And Isam believed him.

CHAPTER II.

Isam's annual runaway freak had worried Major Worthington more than anything of like importance he had ever confronted. He cared not an iota for his lost time, nor for his bad example, but it galled him to think that there was anything in connection with a negro that he could not fathom. In this old negro he had at last found a cunning and a mystery that evaded his penetration. Study as he might, no satisfactory explanation could ever be secured. Year after year about the 1st of July his factotum failed to appear, and the place that had known him so long knew him no more for a fortnight.

It was seldom that the major ever threatened a servant. Never before in his life had a threat been leveled at Isam, who was a privileged character about the house. It was not surprising therefore that just before daybreak next morning a knock was heard at the major's window. That individual understood it, and quietly donning his clothes went outside, assured that he would find Isam on hand. He was not mistaken.

"It's dun struck me, Mass' Craffud, en I's 'bliged ter go," said Isam.

"Ah!" said the major, "then we'll talk it over first."

Isam sat upon the steps, the major in his old rocker, and talk it over they did, until a pale glimmer trembled in the east. What passed between them no one ever learned, but finally the major rose, and preceded by Isam, who bore a pack that gave him the appearance of a sable Kris Kringle, struck out straight across the fence and the fields, disappearing in the woods beyond. Only the hounds knew when they left, and these tugged at their chains with noisy pleadings, but in vain. When day finally rolled in with streaming banners, Woodhaven was without its master, and the overseer, too much accustomed to the eccentricities of that absent power to worry over his sudden departure, reigned in his stead.

The path of the runaways led first directly past a growth of plum bushes, an acre in extent, that stood out in the open field, a small forest in itself. This was the burial ground, where without regard to order or system the graves of departed negroes, covered with bits of glass, broken cups, abandoned cans and other treasures of the trash heap, dotted the shadowy depths. These glimmered faintly in the gray half light, and Isam shivered slightly as he passed. The movement did not escape the notice of the major, who smiled grimly as he said:

"You don't come this way, Isam, when you run off by yourself."

The sound of a human voice was reassuring, and the negro answered cheerily;

"Yessir. Ain' nuthin go'n ter tech ole Isam. All dem 'n dere is dun boun en sot."

"And what the deuce is 'bound and sot?' "

The major's inquiry betrayed impatience rather than curiosity. He knew well how secretive is the negro of any class when interrogated in connection with his superstitions. Isam shook his head.

"Lor sakes, Mass' Craffud, don' you know all 'bout dat?"

"No," said the major testily; "if I did I wouldn't be wasting breath asking a fool nigger."

"Well," said Isam, willing to compromise in the interest of peace, "w'en er sperrit gits out'n de flesh, de only way hit can be boun en sot es ter plug er tree." He stepped in front of a broken pine near the path and examined it critically. "Dere's er plug roun hyah fur mi'ty nigh ev'y wun dem graves, ef yer knows where ter look."

"What do you mean by this nonsense, Isam? Do you expect me to swallow such stuff?"

"Hit's er fac', Mass' Craffud. Dere, now, dere's er plug, sho' nuff."

Years before—Major Worthington remembered it then—he had come across a split pine from which a half dozen of these plugs had fallen and was surpris-

"Don', Mass' Craffud, don' do it!"

ed by the scare it had caused on the plantation. They were made up of old nails, bits of glass, red pepper and tar and sprinkled wth the blood of a chicken. Each plug contained a few hairs from the head of the deceased and a piece of a garment that had been worn next the skin. Each ingredient had an important significance, but exactly what it was no one knew or knows to this day, unless some aged voodoo lingers in the land and holds the secret.

The major examined the signs pointed out. Only a practiced eye in broad daylight would have been apt to discover them. He deliberately took out his knife and began to pick at a plug. The change that came over Isam was ludicrous. He clutched the major's arm and chattered out:

"Don', Mass' Craffud, don' do it, honey! You mout let de meanes' nigg'r on de place git [illegible], en dere ain tellin w'at 'd h[illegible] 'n. You git chill 'n fev' 'n c[illegible] 'n bad crave, sho's yer born. Oh, Lordy, Lordy, Lordy! Dere, now, t'ank de Lord!"

The major had calmly persisted in his efforts to extract a plug until his knife blade snapped. With a great pretense of rage he persisted with the broken blade until finally, sure enough, out fell the plug. In an instant the negro had seized it and thrust it in place again, and with his back to the tree was begging so piteously the major could not resist.

"All right, idiot," he said laughingly. "Lead the way. I won't trouble it."

Isam moved off without much ado, and the major, who was not built for running races and climbing fences, had as much as he could do to keep up. The negro wagged his head ominously as he hurried along.

"Dere ain' no tellin but w'at dat nigg'r dun got loos' en 'gun his curvortin roun 'fo' now. One time lightnin busted er tree ov'r dere, en seben er dem plugs drap out. En dat summer de typhoid fev'r struck seben nigg'rs, en de las' one uv 'm died spang dead. Ain' nev'r had dat fev'r 'fo' er sence on de place. But dey do say," continued Isam, now anxious to communicate his extensive knowledge of the subject, "ef dem folks had n' burn de light fum dat tree nuthin'd happ'n. Bet you can't git er nigg'r 'n Baldwin county ter burn eny mo' uv de lightnin's light 'ud, en mi'ty few go'n ter rake pine straw 'bout dere."

CHAPTER III.

The human race has certainly been evolved from a barbaric into a partly civilized state. At odd seasons the old instinct crops out and regains control of us. Major Worthington had entered upon his brief lapse into savagery, though he did not realize it. Ill adapted as he was for foot journeys of considerable length, the flush of new freedom sustained him.

But the unwonted exercise told at last. A halt must perforce soon have been ordered, when Isam plunged over a sharp decline and indicating a long line of paler green and a denser growth in front exclaimed:

" 'Mos' dere now!"

The major knew the place. It was the line of the Oconee river mapped in verdure. Reaching the welcome shade, he dropped down where Isam had already pitched his bundle.

Mumbling after the fashion of old darkies, a meaning smile upon his lips, which, after all, is merely thinking aloud, Isam brought from the well filled depths of his kit a small stone jug. Soon, after certain rites and cere-

"Lor bless my soul, ef he ain' dun gone ter sleep!"

monies appropriate to the occasion, he approached the major, and with a triumphant flourish extended a large tumbler of red liquid from which gracefully arose a small forest of mint.

"Dun foun er noo spring," he said, but the man propped against the cypress was motionless, and his hands were folded peacefully in his lap.

Stooping down, Isam peered cautiously under the broad hat brim, with the whispered ejaculation: "Lor bless my soul, ef he ain' dun gone ter sleep! I recken dat las' 10 railer was pow'ful wurrin ter 'r man 'r his fat. Mass' Craffud, Mass' Craffud!" No answer came.

Getting down on his knees, he carefully inserted with a spoon a few drops of the beverage between the lips of the sleeper and allowed them to percolate downward. As the "apple" of the tightened throat darted up and glided down again into place he whispered:

"Mass' Craffud, es yer dun fainted?"

The eyes opened, and the major sat bolt upright. The next minute he drained off the drink and sat contemplating the honest face, in whose eyes was a peculiar look.

"T'ank de goodness!" exclaimed Isam. "I bin er holdin dis hyah julup hyah fur half er hour. Ain' nev'r known you ter balk at er julup 'fo' en 40 yeaurs!"

"That came in the right time, Isam, and it's good whisky," said the major heartily. "Where did you get it?"

"Yessir," chuckled the negro, "hit's good, but hit ain' good ter ask er stray hen w'at's layin en your orchud whar she belong er how many teef she got."

The major realized that he had become a guest. He laughed, sank back against the tree and soon again was lost in slumber. When he awoke, there had been a decided change in his surroundings. A low fire burned a few yards away, and sundry flips of bacon were browning in a frying pan set jauntily thereon, while from the ashes beneath the brown ends of hoecakes protruded.

" 'Tain' but er bite," said Isam apologetically, "but des wait tell de fish git mixed up wid dem sum er dese days, en den you see w'at hit es ter be loos' 'en free."

To be loose and free! The major fixed his eyes upon the old negro as he produced tin platters from his kit an transferred the smoking viands, humble but savory, from the frying pan. The words haunted him, and as the smoke arose there floated upon his vision pictures of boyhood's escapades. Isam had [illegible] from his own infancy. [illegible] 15 years the ques[illegible] altogether unsettled, for the negro was five or six years the senior. How they had hunted and stripped off and set gums for rabbits and snares for birds and robbed nests! Loose and free! Old Isam surveyed with p[illegible] satisfaction the major's fierce attack upon the morning meal.

"Dere ain' no spring chick'n en der pan," he said sentiously, "but er fuss rate app'tite kin git des' es good er grip on er flip er bacon es hit kin on er yaller leg' chicken."

"There is something in that," said the major. "Get your flip, you black rascal, and go to eating." But Isam shook his head.

"No, sah. W'en er nigg'r feeds, he don' wan' no w'ite folks roun. He wan' ter git off en mop de pan 'thout 'tract'n 'tention ter hisse'f."

"It seems to me," said the major, as he transferred another flip of bacon to his platter, "that it must be mighty hard for an honest nigger to live comfortably out here."

Isam's face took on a look of personal injury.

"Er hones' nigg'r," he said, stirring up the ashes and inserting fresh cake, "don' eat no mo' out hyah den he do at home, not a bit. Rashuns es rashuns ennywhar you fine 'em. En I hear say," he continued significantly, "w'en folks goes er vis'tin dey don' 'quire es ter do year marks uv de pig, w'en backbone en spar' ribs en chine es sot out."

"Your idea of etiquette is perfectly sound, Isam."

"En dat only time w'en folks w'at's vis'tin got er right ter git der backs up es w'en de gem'man feed 'esse'f high en feed t' others low."

With an air of dignity the old negro gathered up the remnants of the spread, the major having finished and retired to allay the pangs of an increased appetite, but he was doomed to further delay. A most profane ejaculation fell from the major's lips and came to his ears.

"Des' es I said, dere 'tis ergin—terbacker now." He put aside the repast and grumblingly investigated the kit once more. "En I reck'n w'en he see dis yer bag er terbacker he go'n ter want hits ped'gree all way back."

Nevertheless he produced it, with a handful of corncob pipes, and cutting a reed stem handed to the major the finest smoking outfit in the world. As Isam skillfully balanced a glowing coal upon the little heap of tobacco he concluded:

"Somehow nuther sump'n said 'bout time de runaway noshun struck in, 'Isam, you go'n ter see com'ny terday, and hit's go'n ter be Mass' Craffud,' so I des laid in er bag spesh'ly fur 'm."

The major merely drew in and expelled a cloud of smoke. He contented himself with saying, "You are very thoughtful," and laughing softly to himself Isam retired to his meal. As he finished and stuffed his own cob pipe full of "natural leaf" and perique—brought along especially for his master—Isam cast his eye skyward.

"Mos' 10 er'clock. Mus' be movin out er hyah. Bimeby overseer en houn be 'long in er hurry. Got ter git whar meat es thicker too. Dat bacon en hoecake hard ter beat, but dey don' half fill de bill wid er run'way nigg'r. Des wait twell we git er mess er redbelly en brim, en I reck'n sho' nuff de fun go'n ter b'gin ter start. Time we uz go'n, Mass' Craffud."

The major rose and followed cheerily. Skirting the swamp, Isam soon found a hog path, and presently the runaways came in sight of the river. A batteau was tied up in a little branch near by, and in it lay an ax and a paddle.

"Isam," said the major as he clambered in, "how does it happen that you find a boat and ax all ready here, and the runaway notion only struck you just before day this morning?"

Isam shook his head as he chuckled:

"Hit ain' de rite time er day ter 'splain t'ings, Mass' Craffud. Dere ain' no tellin w'at time dem houn's go'n ter strike er hot trail, en de tree dat you kin clime ain' go'n ter lif' you out'n de reach uv a dog." The little boat, propelled by vigorous strokes, shot out into the river, and gliding under the willows bore its passengers swiftly down stream.

CHAPTER IV.

Shut out from sight of the stream stretched a Bermuda sward hemmed in by gigantic trees, in whose boughs the cicadas were singing. The old boyish enthusiasm rose strong within the major.

"This is the camp," he said, "and there,"—pointing to the log jammed creek behind him, slowly mingling its clear waters with the river's mud—"is the place for bream and redbellies."

Isam fairly shouted:

"Dere, now, dey ain' nev'r no use tellin er man wot knows how ter fish whar ter drap er line. De two go 'long tergether. Des you tek dese hyar lines, Mass' Craffud, en git reddy fer supper, w'ile I 'ten ter de res'."

Throwing open his pack, Isam displayed his simple tackle, hurried around and cut a pole from a neighboring brake, and peeling the bark from a fallen tree picked out a handful of flatheads. Adjusting himself to a log, the major cast his line and began to draw in the bream.

"Dere, now," chuckled Isam, "I ain' seen you do dat sence you was er-courtin Miss 'Mandy Bullard en we all wuz down ter Sykes' fishpond."

But the major was landing fish and did not have time to listen to Isam, observing which that individual, casting an inquiring glance at the sun, seized his ax and went to work in the canebrake. In an incredibly short space of time he had cut down and dragged up enough poles to construct a rude hut, and soon after completed the shanty. Then, with one happy glance at the fugitive perched upon the log contentedly warring with the bream, he glided off into the woods and disappeared from view.

(Continued on page 3)

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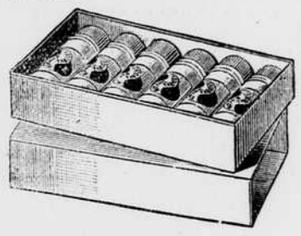

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