

Plantation Pageants

by Joel Chandler Harris

CHAPTER IX.

Buster John Sees Hodo.

Now the lucky chance which gave Buster John opportunity to see the fox hunt was both curious and interesting. The date was fixed upon and the children's grandfather invited the hunters to spend the night with him, so as to have an early start the next morning. So, one Friday afternoon—the hunt was to take place on Saturday—the hunters began to arrive, some singly and some in couples, until all had arrived except young Maxwell and his hound Hodo. Mr. Kilpatrick came, bringing Music and Whalphone, and Tip with others. Mr. Collingsworth brought Panny and Rocket and Harrow with their chorus; and Mr. Dennis brought Rowan and Ruck, and Top, and Flirt. There were other hunters with their dogs, and one or two gentlemen who had no dogs, but who wanted to see the sport.

But these hunters, their friends and their dogs, were not the ones Buster John wanted to see. So he continued to watch the big gate at the head of the avenue. Sweetest Susan watched with him, Drusilla being busy helping their mother, who, as a good housekeeper, looked after her dining room and was not afraid to go into the kitchen. Buster John was anxious lest young Maxwell would fail to come, and said so many times. He had once heard his grandfather reading something that Maxwell had written in the county paper, and he had also heard the negroes talking about the young man, how clever and kind he was. And then his horse, Butterfly, and his hound Hodo! What wonderful tales old Fountain and Johnny Bapter had told about these animals!

But when the sun was about an hour high, and just as Buster John had given up all hope, he saw the big gate swing open. A large dog came through, and after him a rider on a sorrel horse. Without alighting from his horse the rider pulled the gate to and, leaning down until Buster John could see nothing but one of his feet prodding against the saddle, fastened the catch. Buster John had never seen the gate opened and shut in this fashion before, for the latch had been purposely fixed low so that the little negroes could open the gate for the dogs going out and coming in. The dog waited with much dignity for the gate to be shut, and then came dashing along the avenue close at the heels of the cantering horse.

"That's him," cried Buster John, clapping his hands. How often had Johnny Bapter and old Fountain described the horse and rider! "Faint little fellow, look like he 'bout 12 year old." Ranky sorrel horse, wid long mane, an' a tail dat drag de ground." The tail was tied up, owing to the muddy roads, but the mane was loose, and gave the horse a very attractive and picturesque appearance.

Both Buster John and Sweetest Susan ran to meet young Maxwell, but Johnny Bapter was before them.

"Howdy, Marso Joe?" cried Johnny Bapter joyfully.

"Way, howdy, Johnny Bapter?" Then as the children came up, Maxwell shut both eyes tight and said: "Wait! Johnny Bapter, I'll bet you a twist of tobacco that the young man over here is Buster John, and that this beautiful young woman over here is Sweetest Susan." While he was speaking, Johnny Bapter pushed the children

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invisible string." Sure enough! When they reached the side fence, there was Hodo lying directly under the saddle and blanket, which Johnny Bapter had placed on the fence. "You can see the dog and saddle," remarked Maxwell, "but you can't see the string."

Buster John suggested the old carpenter shop, which was a long shed room, the entrance to which had no door. There was a pile of shavings in the shop and Joe Maxwell said it was the very place of all others. So he placed his saddle on the workbench, kicked the shavings together, and told Hodo he could go to bed and pull the cover over his head when he got ready.

"Will he stay?" Buster John asked. The other dogs were all fastened up in the blacksmith shop to keep them from going home.

Young Maxwell laughed. "He'll stay there till I come after the saddle, unless I call him out."

He was for returning to the house, but just then the children saw their grandfather and his other guests coming in their direction.

"Maxwell," said Mr. Collingsworth, "I've heard of you."

And he did. As soon as they went in the house he took Buster John by the hand and went into the parlor where the lady was entertaining her guests with music and conversation. She was in high good humor. Her eyes sparkled, and her laughter was pleasing to the ear.

"Come in, you two boys," she cried merrily. "Here's a comfortable chair by me—shall I call you Mr. Maxwell? I used to call you Joe when you were younger."

"Everybody calls me Joe," said Maxwell. "I have come to ask you a favor. Will you allow Buster John to go hunting with us tomorrow morning?"

"Why, who ever heard of such a thing?"

"Mr. Dennis, there, has heard of it—twice."

The woman looked at Mr. Dennis, who gave an affirmative nod. "How would he go?" she asked.

"On my horse, behind me."

"What do you think of it, father?"

"Why, I think he will be perfectly safe with Joe."

"Let him go, by all means," said Mr. Dennis emphatically. "It will help to make a man of him."

But two on a horse in a fox chase? Why, it's ridiculous," exclaimed the woman. "The horse would break down in half an hour."

"How much does Buster John weigh?" Joe Maxwell asked.

"Fifty-five," said Buster John proudly.

"Then the horse would carry 140 pounds. Mr. Dennis weighs at least thirty pounds more than that, and he's the smallest man in the party."

There was nothing for the mother to do but give her consent, though she gave it with many misgivings, as mothers will, and with many admonitions to Joe Maxwell to take care of the boy, which he faithfully promised to do.

To make sure that he would not be left behind, Buster John begged to be allowed to sleep in the room with Maxwell. This point was easily carried, and the younger went off to bed triumphantly an hour earlier than usual. He was asleep when the hounds were fed on warm cornbread, especially prepared for them, and he was far in the land of dreams when, a little later, Joe Maxwell carried Hodo his supper, which Jimmy had "saved out" for him. It was not large in amount, but carefully selected, and no doubt Hodo enjoyed it, for he made no complaint about it.

Buster John, as has been said, went to bed happy and triumphant, and it seemed to him that he had been in bed but a few moments when he felt Joe Maxwell shaking and rolling him about in bed, and heard him crying out:

"Where's this famous fox hunter who was to go along and take care of me this morning? The horses are all ready, breakfast is ready (so Jimmy says), and everybody is ready except the Great North American Fox Hunter, known far and wide as Buster John. What can be the matter with him?"

In this way Buster John was aroused to the realities, and he remembered with a thrill of delight that this was to be the day of days, so far as he was concerned. He leapt from the bed and was dressed in a fifty.

"Don't wake the house, my son," said Joe Maxwell solemnly. "There's your overcoat your mother sent up last night; the air is chilly this morning. There was a cold rain during the night."

"But you have no overcoat," remarked Buster John.

"Oh, I'm tough," replied Joe Maxwell. "I've been out to look after my horse and dog. They are both prime, and the weather is prime. If the fox we are going after is a friend of yours, you may as well bid him good-bye this morning."

"He's very cunning," explained Buster John. "A great many dogs have chased him. He is called Scar-Face."

"I've heard of him many a time," replied Joe Maxwell. "That's the reason I'm here this morning, and you get a good chance, tell him good-bye."

"I think he knows all about this hunt,"

HE CREEPT DIRECTLY UNDER THE HEN.

heard a heap of loose talk about this wonderful dog of yours. I lay you I have two on an outfit him. Dennis has another, and Kilpatrick another. Where've you hid him? I don't mind dark horses in politics, but I don't like dark dogs in fox chases."

"Then you'll not like Hodo," remarked Joe Maxwell, "for he's very dark, almost black, like Hodo."

The hound instantly came from the shed, and stood looking at his master, his head turned expectantly to one side. This gesture, as you may call it, was somewhat comical, but it was impressive, too. Hodo was large for a hound, but very compactly built. His breast bone and fore shoulders were very prominent, his chest was deep and full, his hams were almost abnormally developed and his tail ran to a keen point. His color was glossy black except for a dash of brown and white on his breast and legs and a white strip between his eyes. His ears were shorter than those of the average pointer. His shape and build were on the order of a finely bred bull terrier, only on a very much larger scale.

"You call that a hound," remarked Mr. Collingsworth jokingly.

"If the Birdsong dogs are hounds," responded Joe Maxwell.

"He's a pretty dog," said Mr. Kilpatrick, "but he'll have some warm work cut out for him in the morning."

During this brief conversation Buster John had approached close to Hodo, and now laid his hand on the dog curiously. Hodo flinched as if he had been stung, and snarled savagely, but instinct or curiosity caused him to nose the youngster, and then he whined and wagged, watching jealously as if he had found an old friend.

"Well, well!" exclaimed Maxwell; "this is the first time I have ever known him to make friends with a stranger. He has two faults, a bad temper and a hard head."

Hodo fawned on Buster John and whined wistfully. Once he curved his tail in peculiar fashion, and ran around, and lither and yonder, as if he were keen for a frolic. Maxwell was so astonished at these manifestations that he could do nothing but laugh. Hodo's antics, however, had attracted attention in another quarter. A brindle cur belonging to one of the negroes took offense at the playful spirit of the strange dog, and came rushing toward him, barking furiously. The cur was as large as Hodo, and quite as formidable looking. The hound heard the challenge and rushed to accept it, and the two dogs came together some distance from the spectators.

There was a fierce wrangle for the advantage, and then those watching the contest saw Hodo dragging the cur about by the neck and shaking him furiously. When Hodo finally gave him his liberty, the cur ran toward the negro quarters.

"I told you he wasn't a hound!" exclaimed Mr. Collingsworth. "If he is, he's not a common hound."

"I agree with you there," said Joe Maxwell, laughing.

Returning from his encounter, Hodo went to Buster John and rubbed his head against the youngster, and followed him about.

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This, of course, was very pleasing to Joe Maxwell; for ordinarily Hodo was very vicious with strangers, and especially with children.

When supper, which was a very substantial meal, had been discussed, Joe Maxwell called for Buster John and the two went to the lot. On the way there they were joined by Johnny Bapter.

"Show me where my horse is, Johnny Bapter," said Joe Maxwell.

"He right yonder, sah, in de best stall dey is. His legs all clear."

"Well, then, Johnny Bapter, I want fifteen ears of corn, not the biggest, with sound ends, and two bundles of fodder. Put the corn in the trough, untie the bundles of fodder outside and whip as much dust out of it as you can. And then place a bucket of water in one end of the trough."

This was all very quickly and deftly done, for Joe Maxwell's tobacco, as Johnny Bapter described it, "tasted like me," and the way to get more was to look after that sorrel horse.

"I hope you are going along with us in the morning," said Joe Maxwell to Buster John as they were returning to the house.

"Oh, I wish I could!" the boy exclaimed; "I'd give anything to go, but mamma says I'm too young. She's afraid something will happen to me."

Young Maxwell laughed. "Why, I went fox hunting before I was as old as you. Mr. Dennis took me behind him twice, because I promised I wouldn't hunt rabbits with his fox hounds."

"Please tell mamma that!" cried Buster John.

"I certainly will," said Maxwell.

And he did. As soon as they went in the house he took Buster John by the hand and went into the parlor where the lady was entertaining her guests with music and conversation. She was in high good humor. Her eyes sparkled, and her laughter was pleasing to the ear.

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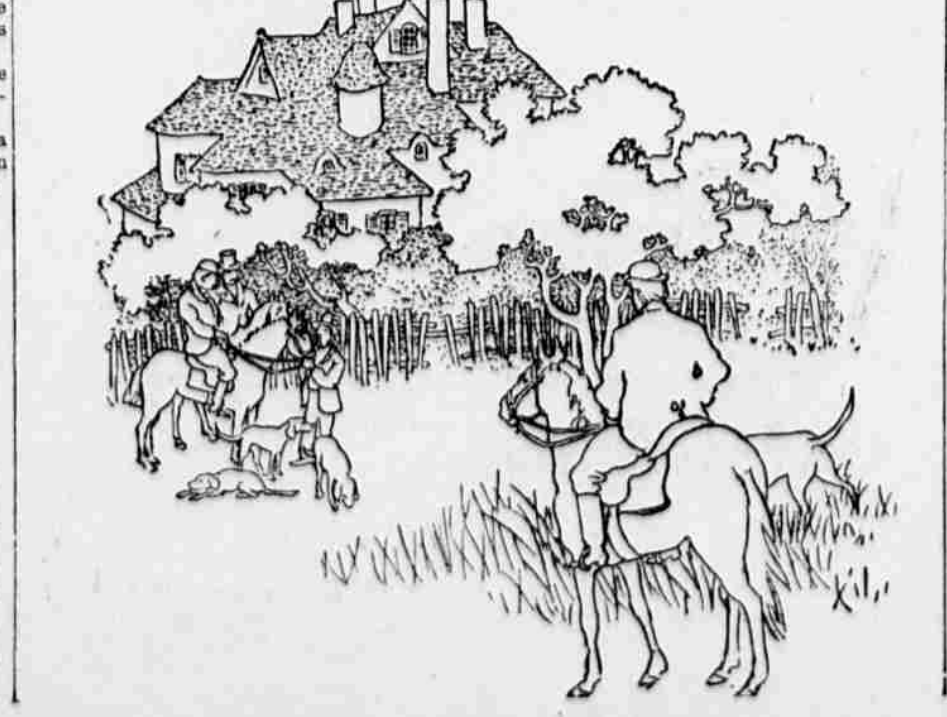
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