

When Wild Plums Blossom

By JEANNETTE H. WALWORTH.

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If the ceremony of baptism had ever been performed for the benefit of Johnnie Ralston, he would have figured in the parish register as John C. Calhoun Ralston, but neither parish register nor baptismal font could have been found within twenty miles of the lonely plantation where he first saw the light.

Given locality and environment and the corruption of the boy's name was inevitable. In bestowing the name of the illustrious state's righter on his only son bluff Bruce Ralston had apparently trusted to his achieving greatness from association of ideas evidently, for other aids to progress were conspicuously absent.

He was the last direct Ralston. There were collateral, nephews and cousins, but no straightout descendant



"NEVER, NEVER, JOHN RALSTON!"

of old Daniel Ralston, who, having opened a plantation in the swamp lands of Louisiana before 1800 had been scalded, had fought Indians and malaria with even handed impartiality, vanquishing the first until vanquished by the last.

In the bitter moods which came to him later in life—that is, after a girl had slain hope in him by a word of negation—he was given to declaring that he might have attempted something worth the doing if his whole family connection had not drilled it into him that he must follow in the footsteps of his fathers. Now, as his fathers had never done anything but "fight at the drop of a hat" or "bullyrag" their neighbors into attitudes of deferential respect, there was something in the more refined fiber of the last of the Ralstons which made him shrink from following in their footsteps.

His mother, gentle mistress, improved her opportunities while combing the tangles out of his wiry, curly hair to pour into his boyish ears stories of his father's splendid dash during the "Mexican muddle." She could never insure attention save when she had her fingers closely entwined in his black locks, and as her reminiscent pride waxed warmer she would bring her comb charging through the serried ranks of his tangles in a fashion to make him wish he had been born without a father.

In a burst of chagrin his aunt Martha communicated her disappointment to his aunt Jane soon after he had completed his short term of schooling: "I'm afraid we've got a milkop in the Ralston family at last, Jane. Not that I want the boy to drink or race horses or do a lot of things the old set did, but his father warn't afraid of his toddy, and he was a man that was a man when it came to a pinch."

In response his aunt Jane mournfully admitted that she was afraid the boy had "kinks in his brain," which, being a species of disorder no previous Ralston had ever been afflicted with, caused Miss Martha to ask tartly: "What sort of kinks, Jane?"

"Oh, scruples—scruples about not fighting, about its being more manly to dwell together in amity with everybody and all that sort of impractical nonsense. I'm afraid he is tame, Sister Martha, dreadfully tame, and he could whip any man in the parish with one hand tied behind him. He's flavorless utterly."

His sense of having disappointed local expectation was sharply emphasized by the cruel directness of a girl's tongue. Of course he loved her; otherwise her scorn would have fallen harmless.

Such a small creature, a dimpling, laughing child to the eye, an imperi-

ous despot when the mood was upon her, a girl with the cooling voice of a wood pigeon, and yet under the blow she dealt him the great fellow went down as if heaven's own bolts had struck him. All the sunshine, all the purpose, of his life went out in an hour of exquisite pain.

One short hour out of the long, sweet May morning he and she had consumed searching for the pale wild violets she loved and she wanted. The soft spring air was perfumed by the lacelike blossoms of the wild plums.

He had come of age that very week. The Cross Bayou place was his own

now. Why should he not ask Katie to be his mistress and his well beloved little wife? Then and there he would do it.

She had bidden him lift her into a grapevine swing that looped itself from branch to branch of two wild plum trees. They were white with the fullness of their blossom tide.

She was but a light armful. He could easily have put her in the coveted seat with one hand, but he trembled under the pressure of her sweet young body, and his great heart thumped violently against his ribs, all because he was such a coward Ralston, you see!

The swaying of the swing set the delicate plum blossoms a-falling. They gemmed her brown hair and fell upon her lap. She filled her little hands with them and laughed gaily:

"Such pretty, gauzy petals! They look like fairy lace. Titania's wedding veil might well have been woven of just such stuff."

He had thrown himself on the ground at her feet. His great brown eyes were full of the dumb adoration of a slave.

"When I get married," he heard her say, "I'll have a wedding bell made of the wild plum blossoms—so much daintier than the stiff, conventional things one always sees."

He laughed nervously. "I'll have a whole wagon load of them gathered as soon as you say the word."

She stared at him insolently. "What word?"

"Such a little word, Katie—yes." She still held him mercilessly with the blue eyes that had taken on the chill of polished steel.

"What are you talking about, Johnnie Ralston?"

He rose from his crouching posture to tower over her commandingly.

"Don't you know that I love you, Katie? You will have to answer 'Yes' to that. There's no other honest answer."

She flung her answer at him defiantly: "Yes. What then?"

"And don't you know that I want to marry you? Haven't you known it these half dozen years, Katie?"

"Yes. What then?"

"Then"—he held out pleading hands to her—"oh, my little girl, will you not come to me while the sweet wild plums are blossoming for you and for me? I will try so hard to make you glad all the days of your life."

From under her crown of wild flowers she looked at him with a cruel smile of negation. She vaulted lightly earthward and stood before him with her small hands clasped behind her. Standing thus, she dealt him his deathblow.

"Never, never, never, John Ralston! I'll marry no coward, an it please you, sir. Why didn't you kill Dave Sturms the other day instead of turning the other cheek? Ah, you thought I would never hear of it, but you see I have—I have!" Her pretty face was dark with passion. "No man shall ever point the finger of scorn at my husband. Wedding bell will never hang over you and me, John. Goodbye!"

She flung him a mocking farewell from the tips of her fingers and sped homeward alone through the leafy aisles of the forest.

He stood like a man who has received his deathblow in battle. All the sweetness had gone out of the air, all the light out of the sunny day. He flung out his hands with a gesture of despair.

She had never loved him or she could not have condemned him unheard. How easy to convict her of error if it had been worth while!

It was then that he retired to the Cross Bayou place and took up the life of a hermit crab, all because he was a coward, you see.

Only one human being accepted him unquestioningly, believed in him absolutely. That was Black Prince, and when Johnnie went into retirement on the Cross Bayou place Black Prince went with him.

Prince was his foster brother and his chattel. Mammy Ann had nursed them both from her full maternal fountains. There was nothing princely about the chattel save his loyalty and a chivalric devotion that found all the reward it asked in obliterating self for the object it adored.

"Me and Marse Johnnie" comprised the universe for Black Prince.

From Black Prince's point of view life as it was lived at Cross Bayou by "me and Marse Johnnie" was simply perfect. A little labor and a great deal of resting—what more could heart of man ask?

If the white man had his periods of self disgust and bitter retrospection, the black one was never the wiser for it. If there came to the master moments of passionate longing, when a shadowy girl face looked at him from

out the memory land with a cruel smile of negation on her sweet face, the chattel was never the sadder for it. If Prince was conscious of any defined longings, it was to have things go on just as they were forever and forever unless, indeed, it might be for the glorious annual excitement of a barbecue.

There was an unwritten law which impelled the people about Cross Bayou to rally once a year and "ketch up with local affairs."

No man assuming to be considered a good citizen dared absent himself from the general rally. Even Johnnie felt the obligation laid upon him. The gloom lifted temporarily from his handsome face as he took the reins from his hostler and gave rein to his spirited bays and—to his fancy.

Of course Katie Vernon would be there. He had stayed away from two annual barbecues now for that very reason. But he believed he had found the words in which he could make her repent of her cruel charge without having to blacken another man's character.

Perhaps she had already repented. Aunt Martha had given him a friendly message from her the last time he had seen her. Two years now since Katie had dealt him that blow under the wild plum trees. The plum trees were in blossom again. He could catch the perfume of them as he spun rapidly toward the barbecue grounds. The scent of them had always haunted him since that day.

Perhaps he could persuade her to drive home with him behind his handsome bays. She dearly loved a fine horse. He had started late in order to make a more imposing arrival. He wanted Katie to see him. His first glance was cast toward the fringe of woods where the carriages already stood in serried ranks. Yes, the old Vernon coach was there, but empty. The girls would be gathering wild flowers until called to take their places at the long improvised tables.

As soon as he could find Prince, who had gone ahead with the hampers, he would hand over his team and go in search of Katie. But the boy was singularly hard to find. In and out of the laughing, dancing, rollicking crowd he wound his way in increasing irritation.

On the outskirts of the grounds he latched his horses and pursued his search on foot. At last, curled up on the roots of a willow tree which overhung the water's edge, he found his foster brother. He sat with his woolly head buried in his clasped hands. "Prince! Drunk?"

A wet but sober face was lifted in response to the sharp demand.

"Is been hit, Marse Johnnie. Me yo' re'y own nigger. Marse Dave Sturms done it. It were this way: Miss Katie Vernon an' a passel er young ladies went by this a-way with their hands full er will' flowers, and when they been gone a little ways I seen something blue laying on the ground. I pick it up an' see it was a little blue silk handkerchief Miss Katie had wore tied about her neck. I pick it up an' were foldin' it up, meanin' uv cose for to follow Miss Katie up with it, when Marse Dave Sturms he step out of the bushes an' ask me if I see anything uv a lady's silk handkerchief. I say yes an' how I meant to carry it to Miss Katie."

"Then he laugh an' say he reckon not much, an' then I sass him a little an' say I warn't nuther a thief nor a liar—you done teach me better manners. Then he say he teach me better manners then I kin ever learn from a milkop like John Ralston, an' with that he haul off an' hit me a lick. It warn't the lick I minded, Marse Johnnie, but he didn't talk respectful of you."

It is probable this last clause was lost on Johnnie. He turned away without a word beyond an order for Prince to look after the bays. Sturms was not hard to find. He was standing beside the improvised bar drinking a julep. Johnnie asked him for a private interview. A two mile tramp carried them far enough from the barbecue grounds for all practical purposes. There was but one way to settle it.

Would Mr. Sturms apologize for the blow struck Prince? No? Then—

It was not practicable to carry him home behind the bays. He was laid in a skiff, and a white sheet hid his



HIS STRONG RIGHT ARM DROPPED NERVELESS.

pallid face from the glittering stars that came into the evening skies long before the skiff reached home, heralded by the rhythmic beat of her oars. Its sheeted dead lay in quiet state.

Perhaps results might have been different if David Sturms at the crucial moment had not insolently taken a little blue silk handkerchief from his side pocket and drawn it with affected indifference across his brow before returning it to the pocket which covered a coward's heart.

A bit of the blue and white remained in view. John Ralston's strong right arm dropped nerveless. He could not aim at the kerchief which had lain on Katie's bosom.

"I warn't worth it," Black Prince moaned, groveling in abject misery before a houseful of stricken women.

It was Miss Martha who answered him with a note of melancholy pride in her voice:

"It was not for you, you foolish boy. It was for his name's sake. A Ralston could have done no less."

It is Katie Vernon who spreads the wild plum blossoms over his grave every spring. In her heart she vows that no wedding bell shall ever swing above her head since she has slain the one love of her life.

Uncanny. "Did that lady think she would like the flat?" asked the landlord.

"Yes," replied his assistant, "but there's one thing rather strange about her case."

"Her references appear to be all right. What's the matter with her?"

"She didn't say anything about the horrible taste the woman had who lived there before or hint that the place would have to be entirely repapered and redecorated before she would take it."—Chicago Record-Herald.

All Cameras Point to Africa. The lion and the elephant, The tiger full of wile, The zebra and the tall giraffe, The languid crocodile,

The sulky hippopotamus, The leopard and the gnu, The panther and the python snake, The little jackal, too—

Is this a circus catalogue? Oh, not by any means! I'm naming you the pictures In this month's magazines. —Newark Evening News.

In the African Jungle. The Monk—What's that big lion sitting in the front of the booboo tree for?

The Hippo—Poor old chap! He's been sitting there for a week. Don't you see what he's got hanging on the tree? The Monk—No. What is it? The Hippo—It's a calendar. The old chap is counting the days.—Cleveland Plain Dealer.

Spring Pastimes. When I peruse the seedman's book, That handy guide, And at the tempting pictures look, Then I decide To purchase hoe and spade and rake And gleefully a garden make.

But when the poultry book I read, See Wyandottes And Plymouth Rocks of stately breed In handsome lots, I feel I really cannot sleep Till I begin to chickens keep. —Louisville Courier-Journal.

Shore Lots. Cittyman—Oh, these are the shore lots you advertised? Well, there doesn't seem to be much to them. Boomley—Say, you want to come up and have a look at them when the tide's out!—New York Life.

The Men's Joke. Said the barnyard goose, "Mrs. Hen, please tell Why you laid an egg in the old dry well." Said the wise old hen, "If you really must know, I thought it time for me to 'lay low.'" —Detroit Free Press.

NEW SHORT STORIES

Rather Fight Than Feed 'Em. When at Gaines Mill in 1862 the Fifth Texas captured two whole regiments of Yankees the Texan soldiers were all very proud of their achievement. J. B. Polley was one of them, and in his "Soldier's Letters to Charming Nellie" he describes an amusing scene in connection with the surrender.

When the Yankee officers surrendered their swords in a body to Colonel Upton they were so prompt in the duty that he was compelled to lay down the frying pan which he carried in place of a sword and hold the weapons presented in his arms.

Just then he noticed a commotion at the far end of the captured regiments. That was near the timber, and a squad of the prisoners were making an ef-



SPRINGING UP ON A LOG, UPTON SHOUTED.

fort to pass by "Big John" Ferris of Company B, who stood there unaided, endeavoring to intercept them.

Springing up on a log, the armful of swords dangling about in every direction, Upton shouted:

"You, John Ferris! What are you trying to do now?"

"I'm trying to keep these fellows from escaping," returned Big John in a stentorian voice.

"Let them go, your infernal fool!" shouted back Upton. "We'd a sight rather fight 'em than feed 'em!"—New York Sun.

The Lesson. Professor Charles Zueblin of the University of Chicago was discussing at a dinner the Easter myths and legends of the world.

"The legends that are beautiful and immortal," he said, "have in them truths that we all, according to our kind, take home. This is true likewise of immortal works of art—pictures, poems, songs. For different people they have different messages."

"For instance?" said a young girl. "For instance," smiled Professor Zueblin, "in my native Pendleton some of the mothers used to cut the children's hair. They did it with shears and a bowl. The operation was often painful, and the result was never elegant."

"In Sunday school a Pendleton teacher once told her pupils the tragic story of Samson and Delilah. Then she turned to a little boy.

"What do you learn, Joe," she said, "from the Samson story?"

"It don't never pay," piped Joe, "to have a woman cut a feller's hair."—Cincinnati Enquirer.

A Victim. Horace Bixey, the dozen of Mississippi pilots, is still at the wheel at eighty-two. To him Mark Twain served his apprenticeship.

A Vicksburg reporter asked Mr. Bixey for a recipe for a hale old age.

"Temperance, young man," the pilot replied. "Intemperance is what kills us off. Oh, the victims," he said in his whimsical way—"the sad victims of intemperance I have seen!"

"Once I remember a passenger of ours fell overboard. We fished him out with a boat hook after he had been soaking on the bottom half an hour or so. We laid him limp and sopping on the deck, and a steward ran for the whisky bottle.

"As I pried the man's mouth open to pour some whisky down his throat his lips moved. A kind of murmur came from them. I put my ear down close to listen, and I heard the half-drowned wretch say:

"Roll me on a bar'l fust to git some o' this water out. It'll weaken the licker!"