

# *A Cheap Nigger*

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**Freeditorial** 

## I.

“Have you seen the *Clayville Dime*?”

Moore chucked me a very shabby little sheet of printed matter. It fluttered feebly in the warm air, and finally dropped on my recumbent frame. I was lolling in a hammock in the shade of the verandah.

I did not feel much inclined for study, but I picked up the *Clayville Dime* and lazily glanced at that periodical, while Moore relapsed into the pages of *Ixtlilxochitl*. He was a literary character for a planter, had been educated at Oxford (where I made his acquaintance), and had inherited from his father, with a large collection of Indian and Mexican curiosities, a taste for the ancient history of the New World.

Sometimes I glanced at the newspaper; sometimes I looked out at the pleasant Southern garden, where the fountain flashed and fell among weeping willows, and laurels, orange-trees, and myrtles.

“Hullo!” I cried suddenly, disturbing Moore’s Aztec researches, “here is a queer affair in the usually quiet town of Clayville. Listen to this;” and I read aloud the following “par,” as I believe paragraphs are styled in newspaper offices:—

“Instinct and Accident.—As Colonel Randolph was driving through our town yesterday and was passing Captain Jones’s sample-room, where the colonel lately shot Moses Widlake in the street, the horses took alarm and started

violently downhill. The colonel kept his seat till rounding the corner by the Clayville Bank, when his wheels came into collision with that edifice, and our gallant townsman was violently shot out. He is now lying in a very precarious condition. This may relieve Tom Widlake of the duty of shooting the colonel in revenge for his father. It is commonly believed that Colonel Randolph's horses were maddened by the smell of the blood which has dried up where old Widlake was shot. Much sympathy is felt for the colonel. Neither of the horses was injured."

"Clayville appears to be a lively kind of place," I said. "Do you often have shootings down here?"

"We do," said Moore, rather gravely; "it is one of our institutions with which I could dispense."

"And do you 'carry iron,' as the Greeks used to say, or 'go heeled,' as your citizens express it?"

"No, I don't; neither pistol nor knife. If any one shoots me, he shoots an unarmed man. The local bullies know it, and they have some scruple about shooting in that case. Besides, they know I am an awkward customer at close quarters."

Moore relapsed into his Mexican historian, and I into the newspaper.

"Here is a chance of seeing one of your institutions at last," I said.

I had found an advertisement concerning a lot of negroes to be sold that very day by public auction in Clayville. All this, of course, was "before the war."

"Well, I suppose you ought to see it," said Moore, rather reluctantly. He was gradually emancipating his own servants, as I knew, and was even suspected of being a director of "the Underground Railroad" to Canada.

"Peter," he cried, "will you be good enough to saddle three horses and bring them round?"

Peter, a "darkey boy" who had been hanging about in the garden, grinned and went off. He was a queer fellow, Peter, a plantation humourist, well taught in all the then unpublished lore of "Uncle Remus." Peter had a way of his own, too, with animals, and often aided Moore in collecting objects of natural history.

"Did you get me those hornets, Peter?" said Moore, when the black returned with the horses.

"Got 'em safe, massa, in a little box," replied Peter, who then mounted and followed at a respectful distance as our squire.

Without many more words we rode into the forest which lay between Clayville and Moore's plantation. Through the pine barrens ran the road, and on each side of the way was luxuriance of flowering creepers. The sweet faint scent of the white jessamine and the homely fragrance of honeysuckle filled the air, and the wild white roses were in perfect blossom. Here and there an aloe reminded me that we were not at home, and dwarf palms and bayonet palmettoes, with the small pointed leaf of the "live oak," combined to make the scenery look foreign and unfamiliar. There was a soft haze in the air, and the sun's beams only painted, as it were, the capitals of the tall pillar-like pines, while the road was canopied and shaded by the skeins of grey moss that hung thickly on all the boughs.

The trees grew thinner as the road approached the town. Dusty were the ways, and sultry the air, when we rode into Clayville and were making for "the noisy middle market-place." Clayville was but a small border town, though it could then boast the presence of a squadron of cavalry, sent there to watch the "border ruffians." The square was neither large nor crowded, but the spectacle was strange and interesting to me. Men who had horses or carts to dispose of were driving or riding about, noisily proclaiming the excellence of their wares. But buyers were more concerned, like myself, with the slave-market. In the open air, in the middle of the place, a long table was set. The crowd gathered round this, and presented types of various sorts of citizens. The common "mean white" was spitting and staring—a man fallen so low that he had no nigger to wallop, and was thus even more abject, because he had no natural place and functions in local society, than the slaves themselves. The local drunkard was uttering sagacities to which no mortal attended. Two or three speculators were bidding on commission, and there were a few planters, some of them mounted, and a mixed multitude of tradesmen, loafers, bar-keepers, newspaper reporters, and idlers in general. At either end of the long table sat an auctioneer, who behaved with the traditional facetiousness of the profession. As the "lots" came on for sale they mounted the platform, generally in family parties. A party would fetch from one thousand to fifteen hundred dollars, according to its numbers and "condition." The spectacle was painful and monstrous. Most of the "lots" bore the examination of their points with a kind of placid dignity, and only showed some little interest when the biddings grew keen and flattered their pride.

The sale was almost over, and we were just about to leave, when a howl of derision from the mob made us look round. What *I* saw was the apparition of an extremely aged and debilitated black man standing on the table. What Moore saw to interest him I could not guess, but he grew pale and uttered an oath of surprise under his breath, though he rarely swore. Then he turned his horse's head again towards the auctioneer. That merry tradesman was

extolling the merits of nearly his last lot. “A very remarkable specimen, gentlemen! Admirers of the antique cannot dispense with this curious nigger—very old and quite imperfect. Like so many of the treasures of Greek art which have reached us, he has had the misfortune to lose his nose and several of his fingers. How much offered for this exceptional lot—unmarried and without encumbrances of any kind? He is dumb too, and may be trusted with any secret.”

“Take him off!” howled some one in the crowd.

“Order his funeral!”

“Chuck him into the next lot.”

“What, gentlemen, *no* bids for this very eligible nigger? With a few more rags he would make a most adequate scarecrow.”

While this disgusting banter was going on I observed a planter ride up to one of the brokers and whisper for some time in his ear. The planter was a bad but unmistakable likeness of my friend Moore, worked over, so to speak, with a loaded brush and heavily glazed with old Bourbon whisky. After giving his orders to the agent he retired to the outskirts of the crowd, and began flicking his long dusty boots with a serviceable cowhide whip.

“Well, gentlemen, we must really adopt the friendly suggestion of Judge Lee and chuck this nigger into the next lot.”

So the auctioneer was saying, when the broker to whom I have referred cried out, “Ten dollars.”

“*This* is more like business,” cried the auctioneer. “Ten dollars offered! What amateur says more than ten dollars for this lot? His extreme age and historical reminiscences alone, if he could communicate them, would make him invaluable to the student.”

To my intense amazement Moore shouted from horseback, “Twenty dollars.”

“What, *you* want a cheap nigger to get your hand in, do you, you blank-blanked abolitionist?” cried a man who stood near. He was a big, dirty-looking bully, at least half drunk, and attending (not unnecessarily) to his toilet with the point of a long, heavy knife.

Before the words were out of his mouth Moore had leaped from his horse and delivered such a right-handed blow as that wherewith the wandering beggarman smote Irus of old in the courtyard of Odysseus, Laertes’ son. “On his neck, beneath the ear, he smote him, and crushed in the bones; and the red blood gushed up through his mouth, and he gnashed his teeth together as he kicked the ground.” Moore stooped, picked up the bowie-knife, and sent it

glittering high through the air.

“Take him away,” he said, and two rough fellows, laughing, carried the bully to the edge of the fountain that played in the corner of the square. He was still lying crumpled up there when we rode out of Clayville.

The bidding, of course, had stopped, owing to the unaffected interest which the public took in this more dramatic interlude. The broker, it is true, had bid twenty-five dollars, and was wrangling with the auctioneer.

“You have my bid, Mr. Brinton, sir, and there is no other offer. Knock down the lot to me.”

“You wait your time, Mr. Isaacs,” said the auctioneer. “No man can do two things at once and do them well. When Squire Moore has settled with Dick Bligh he will desert the paths of military adventure for the calmer and more lucrative track of commercial enterprise.”

The auctioneer’s command of long words was considerable, and was obviously of use to him in his daily avocations.

When he had rounded his period, Moore was in the saddle again, and nodded silently to the auctioneer.

“Squire Moore bids thirty dollars. Thirty dollars for this once despised but now appreciated fellow-creature,” rattled on the auctioneer.

The agent nodded again.

“Forty dollars bid,” said the auctioneer.

“Fifty,” cried Moore.

The broker nodded.

“Sixty.”

The agent nodded again.

The bidding ran rapidly up to three hundred and fifty dollars.

The crowd were growing excited, and had been joined by every child in the town, by every draggled and sunburnt woman, and the drinking-bar had disgorged every loafer who felt sober enough to stay the distance to the centre of the square.

My own first feelings of curiosity had subsided. I knew how strong and burning was Moore’s hatred of oppression, and felt convinced that he merely wished at any sacrifice of money to secure for this old negro some peaceful days and a quiet deathbed.

The crowd doubtless took the same obvious view of the case as I did, and was now eagerly urging on the two competitors.

“Never say die, Isaacs.”

“Stick to it, Squire; the nigger’s well worth the dollars.”

So they howled, and now the biddings were mounting towards one thousand dollars, when the sulky planter rode up to the neighbourhood of the table—much to the inconvenience of the “gallery”—and whispered to his agent. The conference lasted some minutes, and at the end of it the agent capped Moore’s last offer, one thousand dollars, with a bid of one thousand two hundred.

“Fifteen hundred,” said Moore, amidst applause.

“Look here, Mr. Knock-’em-down,” cried Mr. Isaacs: “it’s hot and thirsty work sitting, nodding here; I likes my ease on a warm day; so just you reckon that I see the Squire, and go a hundred dollars more as long as I hold up my pencil.”

He stuck a long gnawed pencil erect between his finger and thumb, and stared impertinently at Moore. The Squire nodded, and the bidding went on in this silent fashion till the bids had actually run up to three thousand four hundred dollars. All this while the poor negro, whose limbs no longer supported him, crouched in a heap on the table, turning his haggard eye alternately on Moore and on the erect and motionless pencil of the broker. The crowd had become silent with excitement. Unable to stand the heat and agitation, Moore’s unfriendly brother had crossed the square in search of a “short drink.” Moore nodded once more.

“Three thousand six hundred dollars bid,” cried the auctioneer, and looked at Isaacs.

With a wild howl Isaacs dashed his pencil in the air, tossed up his hands, and thrust them deep down between his coat collar and his body, uttering all the while yells of pain.

“Don’t you bid, Mr. Isaacs?” asked the auctioneer, without receiving any answer except Semitic appeals to holy Abraham, blended with Aryan profanity.

“Come,” said Moore very severely, “his pencil is down, and he has withdrawn his bid. There is no other bidder; knock the lot down to me.”

“No more offers?” said the auctioneer slowly, looking all round the square.

There were certainly no offers from Mr. Isaacs, who now was bounding like the gad-stung Io to the furthest end of the place.

“This fine buck-negro, warranted absolutely unsound of wind and limb, going, going, a shameful sacrifice, for a poor three thousand six hundred dollars. Going, going—gone!”

The hammer fell with a sharp, decisive sound.

A fearful volley of oaths rattled after the noise, like thunder rolling away in the distance.

Moore’s brother had returned from achieving a “short drink” just in time to see his coveted lot knocked down to his rival.

We left the spot, with the negro in the care of Peter, as quickly as might be.

“I wonder,” said Moore, as we reached the inn and ordered a trap to carry our valuable bargain home in—“I wonder what on earth made Isaacs run off like a maniac.”

“Massa,” whispered Peter, “yesterday I jes’ caught yer Brer Hornet a-loafin’ around in the wood. ‘Come wi’ me,’ says I, ‘and bottled him in this yer pasteboard box,’” showing one which had held Turkish tobacco. “When I saw that Hebrew Jew wouldn’t stir his pencil, I jes’ crept up softly and dropped Brer Hornet down his neck. Then he jes’ rose and went. Spec’s he and Brer Hornet had business of their own.”

“Peter,” said Moore, “you are a good boy, but you will come to a bad end.”

## II.

As we rode slowly homeward, behind the trap which conveyed the dear-bought slave, Moore was extremely moody and disinclined for conversation.

“Is your purchase not rather an expensive one?” I ventured to ask, to which Moore replied shortly—

“No; think he is perhaps the cheapest nigger that was ever bought.”

To put any more questions would have been impertinent, and I possessed my curiosity in silence till we reached the plantation.

Here Moore’s conduct became decidedly eccentric. He had the black man conveyed at once into a cool, dark, strong room with a heavy iron door, where the new acquisition was locked up in company with a sufficient meal. Moore and I dined hastily, and then he summoned all his negroes together into the court of the house. “Look here, boys,” he cried: “all these trees”—and he

pointed to several clumps “must come down immediately, and all the shrubs on the lawn and in the garden. Fall to at once, those of you that have axes, and let the rest take hoes and knives and make a clean sweep of the shrubs.” The idea of wholesale destruction seemed not disagreeable to the slaves, who went at their work with eagerness, though it made my heart ache to see the fine old oaks beginning to fall and to watch the green garden becoming a desert. Moore first busied himself with directing the women, who, under his orders, piled up mattresses and bags of cotton against the parapets of the verandahs. The house stood on the summit of a gradually sloping height, and before the moon began to set (for we worked without intermission through the evening and far into the night) there was nothing but a bare slope of grass all round the place, while smoke and flame went up from the piles of fallen timber. The plantation, in fact, was ready to stand a short siege.

Moore now produced a number of rifles, which he put, with ammunition, into the hands of some of the more stalwart negroes. These he sent to their cabins, which lay at a distance of about a furlong and a half on various sides of the house. The men had orders to fire on any advancing enemy, and then to fall back at once on the main building, which was now barricaded and fortified. One lad was told to lurk in a thicket below the slope of the hill and invisible from the house.

“If Wild Bill’s men come on, and you give them the slip, cry thrice like the ‘Bob White,’” said Moore; “if they take you, cry once. If you get off, run straight to Clayville, and give this note to the officer commanding the cavalry.”

The hour was now about one in the morning; by three the dawn would begin. In spite of his fatigues, Moore had no idea of snatching an hour’s rest. He called up Peter (who had been sleeping, coiled up like a black cat, in the smoking-room), and bade him take a bath and hot water into the room where Gumbo, the newly purchased black, had all this time been left to his own reflections. “Soap him and lather him well, Peter,” said Moore; “wash him white, if you can, and let me know when he’s fit to come near.”

Peter withdrew with his stereotyped grin to make his preparations.

Presently, through the open door of the smoking-room, we heard the sounds of energetic splashings, mingled with the inarticulate groans of the miserable Gumbo. Moore could not sit still, but kept pacing the room, smoking fiercely. Presently Peter came to the door—

“Nigger’s clean now, massa.”

“Bring me a razor, then,” said Moore, “and leave me alone with him.”



When Moore had retired, with the razor, into the chamber where his purchase lay, I had time to reflect on the singularity of the situation. In every room loaded rifles were ready; all the windows were cunningly barricaded, and had sufficient loopholes. The peaceful planter's house had become a castle; a dreadful quiet had succeeded to the hubbub of preparation, and my host, yesterday so pleasant, was now locked up alone with a dumb negro and a razor! I had long ago given up the hypothesis that Gumbo had been purchased out of pure philanthropy. The disappointment of baffled cruelty in Moore's brother would not alone account for the necessity of such defensive preparations as had just been made. Clearly Gumbo was not a mere fancy article, but a negro of real value, whose person it was desirable to obtain possession of at any risk or cost. The ghastly idea occurred to me (suggested, I fancy, by Moore's demand for a razor) that Gumbo, at some period of his career, must have swallowed a priceless diamond. This gem must still be concealed about his person, and Moore must have determined by foul means, as no fair means were available, to become its owner. When this fancy struck me I began to feel that it was my duty to interfere. I could not sit by within call (had poor Gumbo been capable of calling) and allow my friend to commit such a deed of cruelty. As I thus parleyed with myself, the heavy iron door of the store-room opened, and Moore came out, with the razor (bloodless, thank Heaven!) in his hand. Anxiety had given place to a more joyous excitement.

"Well?" I said interrogatively.

"Well, all's well. That man has, as I felt sure, the Secret of the Pyramid."

I now became quite certain that Moore, in spite of all his apparent method, had gone out of his mind. It seemed best to humour him, especially as so many loaded rifles were lying about.

"He has seen the myst'ry hid  
Under Egypt's pyramid,"

I quoted; "but, my dear fellow, as the negro is dumb, I don't see how you are to get the secret out of him."

"I did not say he *knew* it," answered Moore crossly; "I said he *had* it. As to Egypt, I don't know what you are talking about—"

At this moment we heard the crack of rifles, and in the instant of silence which followed came the note of the "Bob White."

Once it shrilled, and we listened eagerly; then the notes came twice rapidly, and a sound of voices rose up from the negro outposts, who had been driven in and were making fast the one door of the house that had been left open. From the negroes we learned that our assailants (Bill Hicock's band of border

ruffians, “specially engaged for this occasion”) had picketed their horses behind the dip of the hill and were advancing on foot. Moore hurried to the roof to reconnoitre. The dawn was stealing on, and the smoke from the still smouldering trees, which we had felled and burned, rose through the twilight air.

“Moore, you hound,” cried a voice through the smoke of the furthest pile, “we have come for your new nigger. Will you give him up or will you fight?”

Moore’s only reply was a bullet fired in the direction whence the voice was heard. His shot was answered by a perfect volley from men who could just be discerned creeping through the grass about four hundred yards out. The bullets rattled harmlessly against wooden walls and iron shutters, or came with a thud against the mattress fortifications of the verandah. The firing was all directed against the front of the house.

“I see their game,” said Moore. “The front attack is only a feint. When they think we are all busy here, another detachment will try to rush the place from the back and to set fire to the building. We’ll ‘give them their kail through the reek.’”

Moore’s dispositions were quickly made. He left me with some ten of the blacks to keep up as heavy a fire as possible from the roof against the advancing skirmishers. He posted himself, with six fellows on whom he could depend, in a room of one of the wings which commanded the back entrance. As many men, with plenty of ready-loaded rifles, were told off to a room in the opposite wing. Both parties were thus in a position to rake the entrance with a cross fire. Moore gave orders that not a trigger should be pulled till the still invisible assailants had arrived on his side, between the two projecting wings. “Then fire into them, and let every one choose his man.”

On the roof our business was simple enough. We lay behind bags of cotton, firing as rapidly and making as much show of force as possible, while women kept loading for us. Our position was extremely strong, as we were quite invisible to men crouching or running hurriedly far below. Our practice was not particularly good; still three or four of the skirmishers had ceased to advance, and this naturally discouraged the others, who were aware, of course, that their movement was only a feint. The siege had now lasted about half an hour, and I had begun to fancy that Moore’s theory of the attack was a mistake, and that he had credited the enemy with more generalship than they possessed, when a perfect storm of fire broke out beneath us, from the rooms where Moore and his company were posted. Dangerous as it was to cease for a moment from watching the enemy, I stole across the roof, and, looking down between two of the cotton bags which filled the open spaces of the balustrades, I saw the narrow ground between the two wings simply strewn with dead or

wounded men. The cross fire still poured from the windows, though here and there a marksman tried to pick off the fugitives. Rapidly did I cross the roof to my post. To my horror the skirmishers had advanced, as if at the signal of the firing, and were now running up at full speed and close to the walls of the house. At that moment the door opened, and Moore, heading a number of negroes, picked off the leading ruffian and rushed out into the open. The other assailants fired hurriedly and without aim, then—daunted by the attack so suddenly carried into their midst, and by the appearance of one or two of their own beaten comrades—the enemy turned and fairly bolted. We did not pursue. Far away down the road we heard the clatter of hoofs, and thin and clear came the thrice-repeated cry of the “Bob White.”

“Dick’s coming back with the soldiers,” said Moore; “and now I think we may look after the wounded.”

I did not see much of Moore that day. The fact is that I slept a good deal, and Moore was mysteriously engaged with Gumbo. Night came, and very much needed quiet and sleep came with it. Then we passed an indolent day, and I presumed that adventures were over, and that on the subject of “the Secret of the Pyramid” Moore had recovered his sanity. I was just taking my bedroom candle when Moore said, “Don’t go to bed yet. You will come with me, won’t you, and see out the adventure of the Cheap Nigger?”

“You don’t mean to say the story is to be continued?” I asked.

“Continued? Why the fun is only beginning,” Moore answered. “The night is cloudy, and will just suit us. Come down to the branch.”

The “branch,” as Moore called it, was a strong stream that separated, as I knew, his lands from his brother’s. We walked down slowly, and reached the broad boat which was dragged over by a chain when any one wanted to cross. At the “scow,” as the ferry-boat was called, Peter joined us; he ferried us deftly over the deep and rapid water, and then led on, as rapidly as if it had been daylight, along a path through the pines.

“How often I came here when I was a boy,” said Moore; “but now I might lose myself in the wood, for this is my brother’s land, and I have forgotten the way.”

As I knew that Mr. Bob Moore was confined to his room by an accident, through which an ounce of lead had been lodged in a portion of his frame, I had no fear of being arrested for trespass. Presently the negro stopped in front of a cliff.

“Here is the ‘Sachem’s Cave,’” said Moore. “You’ll help us to explore the cave, won’t you?”

I did not think the occasion an opportune one for exploring caves, but to have withdrawn would have demanded a “moral courage,” as people commonly say when they mean cowardice, which I did not possess. We stepped within a narrow crevice of the great cliff. Moore lit a lantern and went in advance; the negro followed with a flaring torch.

Suddenly an idea occurred to me, which I felt bound to communicate to Moore. “My dear fellow,” I said in a whisper, “is this quite sportsmanlike? You know you are after some treasure, real or imaginary, and, I put it to you as a candid friend, is not this just a little bit like poaching? Your brother’s land, you know.”

“What I am looking for is in my own land,” said Moore. “The river is the march. Come on.”

We went on, now advancing among fairy halls, glistening with stalactites or paved with silver sand, and finally pushing our way through a concealed crevice down dank and narrow passages in the rock. The darkness increased; the pavement plashed beneath our feet, and the drip, drip of water was incessant. “We are under the river-bed,” said Moore, “in a kind of natural Thames Tunnel.” We made what speed we might through this combination of the Valley of the Shadow with the Slough of Despond, and soon were on firmer ground again beneath Moore’s own territory. Probably no other white men had ever crawled through the hidden passage and gained the further penetralia of the cave, which now again began to narrow. Finally we reached four tall pillars, of about ten feet in height, closely surrounded by the walls of rock. As we approached these pillars, that were dimly discerned by the torchlight, our feet made a faint metallic jingling sound among heaps of ashes which strewed the floor. Moore and I went up to the pillars and tried them with our knives. They were of wood, all soaked and green with the eternal damp. “Peter,” said Moore, “go in with the lantern and try if you can find anything there.”

Peter had none of the superstitions of his race, or he would never have been our companion. “All right, massa; me look for Brer Spook.”

So saying, Peter walked into a kind of roofed over-room, open only at the front, and examined the floor with his lantern, stamping occasionally to detect any hollowness in the ground.

“Nothing here, massa, but this dead fellow’s leg-bone and little bits of broken jugs,” and the dauntless Peter came out with his ghastly trophy.

Moore seemed not to lose heart.

“Perhaps,” he said, “there is something on the roof. Peter, give me a back.”

Peter stooped down beside one of the wooden pillars and firmly grasped his own legs above the knee. Moore climbed on the improvised ladder, and was just able to seize the edge of the roof, as it seemed to be, with his hands.

“Now steady, Peter,” he exclaimed, and with a spring he drew himself up till his head was above the level of the roof. Then he uttered a cry, and, leaping from Peter’s back retreated to the level where we stood in some confusion.

“Good God!” he said, “what a sight!”

“What on earth is the matter?” I asked.

“Look for yourself, if you choose,” said Moore, who was somewhat shaken, and at the same time irritated and ashamed.

Grasping the lantern, I managed to get on to Peter’s shoulders, and by a considerable gymnastic effort to raise my head to the level of the ledge, and at the same time to cast the light up and within.

The spectacle was sufficiently awful.

I was looking along a platform, on which ten skeletons were disposed at full length, with the skulls still covered with long hair, and the fleshless limbs glimmering white and stretching back into the darkness.

On the right hand, and crouching between a skeleton and the wall of the chamber (what we had taken for a roof was the floor of a room raised on pillars), I saw the form of a man. He was dressed in gay colours, and, as he sat with his legs drawn up, his arms rested on his knees.

On the first beholding of a dreadful thing, our instinct forces us to rush against it, as if to bring the horror to the test of touch. This instinct wakened in me. For a moment I felt dazed, and then I continued to stare involuntarily at the watcher of the dead. He had not stirred. My eyes became accustomed to the dim and flickering light which the lantern cast in that dark place.

“Hold on, Peter,” I cried, and leaped down to the floor of the cave.

“It’s all right, Moore,” I said. “Don’t you remember the picture in old Lafitau’s ‘Mœurs des Sauvages Américains’? We are in a burying-place of the Cherouines, and the seated man is only the *kywash*, ‘which is an image of woode keeping the deade.’”

“Ass that I am!” cried Moore. “I knew the cave led us from the Sachem’s Cave to the Sachem’s Mound, and I forgot for a moment how the fellows disposed of their dead. We must search the platform. Peter, make a ladder again.”

Moore mounted nimbly enough this time. I followed him.

The *kywash* had no more terrors for us, and we penetrated beyond the fleshless dead into the further extremity of the sepulchre. Here we lifted and removed vast piles of deerskin bags, and of mats, filled as they were with “the dreadful dust that once was man.” As we reached the bottom of the first pile something glittered yellow and bright beneath the lantern.

Moore stooped and tried to lift what looked like an enormous plate. He was unable to raise the object, still weighed down as it was with the ghastly remnants of the dead. With feverish haste we cleared away the *débris*, and at last lifted and brought to light a huge and massive disk of gold, divided into rays which spread from the centre, each division being adorned with strange figures in relief—figures of animals, plants, and what looked like rude hieroglyphs.

This was only the firstfruits of the treasure.

A silver disk, still larger, and decorated in the same manner, was next uncovered, and last, in a hollow dug in the flooring of the sepulchre, we came on a great number of objects in gold and silver, which somewhat reminded us of Indian idols. These were thickly crusted with precious stones, and were accompanied by many of the sacred emeralds and opals of old American religion. There were also some extraordinary manuscripts, if the term may be applied to picture writing on prepared deerskins that were now decaying. We paid little attention to cloaks of the famous feather-work, now a lost art, of which one or two examples are found in European museums. The gold, and silver, and precious stones, as may be imagined, overcame for the moment any ethnological curiosity.

Dawn was growing into day before we reached the mouth of the cave again, and after a series of journeys brought all our spoil to the light of the upper air. It was quickly enough bestowed in bags and baskets. Then, aided by three of Moore’s stoutest hands, whom we found waiting for us in the pine wood, we carried the whole treasure back, and lodged it in the strong room which had been the retreat of Gumbo.

### III.

The conclusion of my story shall be very short. What was the connection between Gumbo and the spoils of the Sachem’s Mound, and how did the treasures of the Aztec Temple of the Sun come to be concealed in the burial place of the Red Man? All this Moore explained to me the day after we secured the treasures.

“My father,” said Moore, “was, as you know, a great antiquarian, and a great collector of Mexican and native relics. He had given almost as much time as Brasseur de Bourbourg to Mexican hieroglyphics, and naturally had made nothing out of them. His chief desire was to discover the Secret of the Pyramid—not the pyramids of Egypt, as you fancied, but the Pyramid of the Sun, Tonatiuh, at Teohuacan. To the problem connected with this mysterious structure, infinitely older than the empire of Montezuma, which Cortes destroyed, he fancied he had a clue in this scroll.”

Moore handed me a prepared sheet of birch bark, like those which the red men use for their rude picture writings. It was very old, but the painted characters were still brilliant, and even a tyro could see that they were not Indian, but of the ancient Mexican description. In the upper left-hand corner was painted a pyramidal structure, above which the sun beamed. Eight men, over whose heads the moon was drawn, were issuing from the pyramid; the two foremost bore in their hands effigies of the sun and moon; each of the others seemed to carry smaller objects with a certain religious awe. Then came a singular chart, which one might conjecture represented the wanderings of these men, bearing the sacred things of their gods. In the lowest corner of the scroll they were being received by human beings dressed unlike themselves, with head coverings of feathers and carrying bows in their hands.

“This scroll,” Moore went on, “my father bought from one of the last of the red men who lingered on here, a prey to debt and whisky. My father always associated the drawings with the treasures of Teohuacan, which, according to him, must have been withdrawn from the pyramid, and conveyed secretly to the north, the direction from which the old Toltec pyramid builders originally came. In the north they would find no civilized people like themselves, he said, but only the Indians. Probably, however, the Indians would receive with respect the bearers of mysterious images and rites, and my father concluded that the sacred treasures of the Sun might still be concealed among some wandering tribe of red men. He had come to this conclusion for some time, when I and my brother returned from school, hastily summoned back, to find him extremely ill. He had suffered from a paralytic stroke, and he scarcely recognized us. But we made out, partly from his broken and wandering words, partly from old Tom (Peter’s father, now dead), that my father’s illness had followed on a violent fit of passion. He had picked up, it seems, from some Indians a scroll which he considered of the utmost value, and which he placed in a shelf of the library. Now, old Gumbo was a house-servant at that time, and, dumb as he was, and stupid as he was, my father had treated him with peculiar kindness. Unluckily Gumbo yielded to the favourite illusion of all servants, white and black, male and female, that anything they find in the library may be used to light a fire with. One chilly day Gumbo lighted the fire

with the newly purchased Indian birch scroll. My father, when he heard of this performance, lost all self-command. In his ordinary temper the most humane of men, he simply raged at Gumbo. He would teach him, he said, to destroy his papers. And it appeared, from what we could piece together (for old Tom was very reticent and my father very incoherent), that he actually branded or tattooed a copy of what Gumbo had burnt on the nigger's body!"

"But," I interrupted, "your father knew all the scroll had to tell him, else he could not have copied it on Gumbo. So why was he in such a rage?"

"You," said Moore, with some indignation, "are not a collector, and you can't understand a collector's feelings. My father knew the contents of the scroll, but what of that? The scroll was the first edition, the real original, and Gumbo had destroyed it. Job would have lost his temper if Job had been a collector. Let me go on. My brother and I both conjectured that the scroll had some connection with the famous riches of the Sun and the secret of the Pyramid of Teohuacan. Probably, we thought, it had contained a chart (now transferred to Gumbo's frame) of the hiding-place of the treasure. However, in the confusion caused by my father's illness, death, and burial, Gumbo escaped, and, being an unusually stupid nigger, he escaped due south-west. Here he seems to have fallen into the hands of some slave-holding Indians, who used him even worse than any white owners would have done, and left him the mere fragment you saw. He filtered back here through the exchange of commerce, 'the higgling of the market,' and as soon as I recognized him at the sale I made up my mind to purchase him. So did my brother; but, thanks to Peter and his hornets, I became Gumbo's owner. On examining him, after he was well washed on the night of the attack, I found this chart, as you may call it, branded on Gumbo's back." Here Moore made a rapid tracing on a sheet of paper. "I concluded that the letters S M (introduced by my father, of course, as the Indian scroll must have been 'before letters') referred to the Sachem's Mound, which is in my land; that the Sun above referred to the treasures of the Sun, that S C stood for the Sachem's Cave, and that the cave led, under the river, within the mound. We might have opened the mound by digging on our own land, but it would have been a long job, and must have attracted curiosity and brought us into trouble. So, you see, the chart Gumbo destroyed was imprinted by my father on his black back, and though he *knew* nothing of the secret he distinctly *had* it."

"Yes," said I, "but why did you ask for a razor when you were left alone with Gumbo?"

"Why," said Moore, "I knew Gumbo was marked somewhere and somehow, but the place and manner I didn't know. And my father might have remembered the dodge of Histiaeus in Herodotus: he might have shaved



Gumbo's head, tattooed the chart on that, and then allowed the natural covering to hide the secret 'on the place where the wool ought to grow.'”



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