

## **Gideon**

By Wells Hastings (1878- )

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"An' de next' frawg dat houn' pup seen, he pass him by wide."

The house, which had hung upon every word, roared with laughter, and shook with a storming volley of applause. Gideon bowed to right and to left, low, grinning, assured comedy obeisances; but as the laughter and applause grew he shook his head, and signaled quietly for the drop. He had answered many encores, and he was an instinctive artist. It was part of the fuel of his vanity that his audience had never yet had enough of him. Dramatic judgment, as well as dramatic sense of delivery, was native to him, qualities which the shrewd Felix Stuhk, his manager and exultant discoverer, recognized and wisely trusted in. Off stage Gideon was watched over like a child and a delicate investment, but once behind the footlights he was allowed to go his own triumphant gait.

It was small wonder that Stuhk deemed himself one of the cleverest managers in the business; that his narrow, blue-shaven face was continually chiseled in smiles of complacent self-congratulation. He was rapidly becoming rich, and there were bright prospects of even greater triumphs, with proportionately greater reward. He had made Gideon a national character, a headliner, a star of the first magnitude in the firmament of the vaudeville theater, and all in six short months. Or, at any rate, he had helped to make him all this; he had booked him well and given him his opportunity. To be sure, Gideon had done the rest; Stuhk was as ready as any one to do credit to Gideon's ability. Still, after all, he, Stuhk, was the discoverer, the theatrical Columbus who had had the courage and the vision.

A now-hallowed attack of tonsillitis had driven him to Florida, where presently Gideon had been employed to beguile his convalescence, and guide him over the intricate shallows of that long lagoon known as the Indian River in search of various fish. On days when fish had been reluctant Gideon had been lured into conversation, and gradually into narrative and the relation of what had appeared to Gideon as humorous and entertaining; and finally Felix, the vague idea growing big within him, had one day persuaded his boatman to dance upon the boards of a long pier where they had made fast for lunch. There, with all the sudden glory of crystallization, the vague idea took definite form and became the great inspiration of Stuhk's career.

Gideon had grown to be to vaudeville much what *Uncle Remus* is to literature: there was virtue in his very simplicity. His artistry itself was native and natural. He loved a good story, and he told it from his own sense of the gleeful morsel upon his tongue as no training could have made him. He always enjoyed his story and himself in the telling. Tales never lost their savor, no matter how often repeated; age was powerless to dim the humor of the thing, and as he had shouted and gurgled and laughed over the fun of things when all alone, or holding forth among the men and women and little children of his color, so he shouted and gurgled and broke from sonorous chuckles to musical, falsetto mirth when he fronted the sweeping tiers of faces across the intoxicating glare of the footlights. He had that rare power of transmitting something of his own enjoyments. When Gideon was on the stage, Stuhk used to enjoy peeping out at the intent, smiling faces of the audience, where men and women and children, hardened theater-goers and folk fresh from the country, sat with moving lips and faces lit with an eager interest and sympathy for the black man strutting in loose-footed vivacity before them.

"He's simply unique," he boasted to wondering local managers--  
"unique, and it took me to find him. There he was, a little black gold-mine, and all of 'em passed him by until I came. Some eye? What? I guess you'll admit you have to hand it some to your Uncle Felix. If

that coon's health holds out, we'll have all the money there is in the mint."

That was Felix's real anxiety--"If his health holds out." Gideon's health was watched over as if he had been an ailing prince. His bubbling vivacity was the foundation upon which his charm and his success were built. Stuhk became a sort of vicarious neurotic, eternally searching for symptoms in his protégé; Gideon's tongue, Gideon's liver, Gideon's heart were matters to him of an unflinching and anxious interest. And of late--of course it might be imagination -- Gideon had shown a little physical falling off. He ate a bit less, he had begun to move in a restless way, and, worst of all, he laughed less frequently.

As a matter of fact, there was ground for Stuhk's apprehension. It was not all a matter of managerial imagination: Gideon was less himself. Physically there was nothing the matter with him; he could have passed his rigid insurance scrutiny as easily as he had done months before, when his life and health had been insured for a sum that made good copy for his press-agent. He was sound in every organ, but there was something lacking in general tone. Gideon felt it himself, and was certain that a "misery," that embracing indisposition of his race, was creeping upon him. He had been fed well, too well; he was growing rich, too rich; he had all the praise, all the flattery that his enormous appetite for approval desired, and too much of it. White men sought him out and made much of him; white women talked to him about his career; and wherever he went, women of color--black girls, brown girls, yellow girls--wrote him of their admiration, whispered, when he would listen, of their passion and hero-worship. "City niggers" bowed down before him; the high gallery was always packed with them. Musk-scented notes scrawled upon barbaric, "high-toned" stationery poured in upon him. Even a few white women, to his horror and embarrassment, had written him of love, letters which he straightway destroyed. His sense of his position was strong in him; he was proud of it. There might be "folks outer their haids," but he had the sense to

remember. For months he had lived in a heaven of gratified vanity, but at last his appetite had begun to falter. He was sated; his soul longed to wipe a spiritual mouth on the back of a spiritual hand, and have done. His face, now that the curtain was down and he was leaving the stage, was doleful, almost sullen.

Stuhk met him anxiously in the wings, and walked with him to his dressing-room. He felt suddenly very weary of Stuhk.

"Nothing the matter, Gideon, is there? Not feeling sick or anything?"

"No, Misteh Stuhk; no, seh. Jes don' feel extry pert, that's all."

"But what is it--anything bothering you?"

Gideon sat gloomily before his mirror.

"Misteh Stuhk," he said at last, "I been steddin' it oveh, and I about come to the delusion that I needs a good po'k-chop. Seems foolish, I know, but it do' seem as if a good po'k-chop, fried jes right, would he'p consid'able to disumpate this misery feelin' that's crawlin' and creepin' round my sperit."

Stuhk laughed.

"Pork-chop, eh? Is that the best you can think of? I know what you mean, though. I've thought for some time that you were getting a little overtrained. What you need is--let me see--yes, a nice bottle of wine. That's the ticket; it will ease things up and won't do you any harm. I'll go, with you. Ever had any champagne, Gideon?"

Gideon struggled for politeness.

"Yes, seh, I's had champagne, and it's a nice kind of lickeh sho enough; but, Misteh Stuhk, seh, I don' want any of them high-tone

drinks to-night, an' ef yo' don' mind, I'd rather amble off 'lone, or mebbe eat that po'k-chop with some otheh cullud man, ef I kin fin' one that ain' one of them no-'count Carolina niggers. Do you s'pose yo' could let me have a little money to-night, Misteh Stuhk?"

Stuhk thought rapidly. Gideon had certainly worked hard, and he was not dissipated. If he wanted to roam the town by himself, there was no harm in it. The sullenness still showed in the black face; Heaven knew what he might do if he suddenly began to balk. Stuhk thought it wise to consent gracefully.

"Good!" he said. "Fly to it. How much do you want? A hundred?"

"How much is coming to me?"

"About a thousand, Gideon."

"Well, I'd moughty like five hun'ed of it, ef that's 'greeable to yo'."

Felix whistled.

"Five hundred? Pork-chops must be coming high. You don't want to carry all that money around, do you?"

Gideon did not answer; he looked very gloomy.

Stuhk hastened to cheer him.

"Of course you can have anything you want. Wait a minute, and I will get it for you.

"I'll bet that coon's going to buy himself a ring or something," he reflected as he went in search of the local manager and Gideon's money.

But Stuhk was wrong. Gideon had no intention of buying himself a ring. For the matter of that, he had several that were amply satisfactory. They had size and sparkle and luster, all the diamond brilliance that rings need to have; and for none of them had he paid much over five dollars. He was amply supplied with jewelry in which he felt perfect satisfaction. His present want was positive, if nebulous; he desired a fortune in his pocket, bulky, tangible evidence of his miraculous success. Ever since Stuhk had found him, life had had an unreal quality for him. His Monte Cristo wealth was too much like a fabulous, dream-found treasure, money that could not be spent without danger of awakening. And he had dropped into the habit of storing it about him, so that in any pocket into which he plunged his hand he might find a roll of crisp evidence of reality. He liked his bills to be of all denominations, and some so large as exquisitely to stagger imagination, others charming by their number and crispness--the dignified, orange paper of a man of assured position and wealth--crackling greenbacks the design of which tinged the whole with actuality. He was specially partial to engravings of President Lincoln, the particular savior and patron of his race. This five hundred dollars he was adding to an unreckoned sum of about two thousand, merely as extra fortification against a growing sense of gloom. He wished to brace his flagging spirits with the gay wine of possession, and he was glad, when the money came, that it was in an elastic-bound roll, so bulky that it was pleasantly uncomfortable in his pocket as he left his manager.

As he turned into the brilliantly lighted street from the somber alleyway of the stage entrance, he paused for a moment to glance at his own name, in three-foot letters of red, before the doors of the theater. He could read, and the large block type always pleased him. "THIS WEEK: GIDEON." That was all. None of the fulsome praise, the superlative, necessary definition given to lesser performers. He had been, he remembered, "GIDEON, America's Foremost Native Comedian," a title that was at once boast and challenge. That necessity was now past, for he was a national character; any

explanatory qualification would have been an insult to the public intelligence. To the world he was just "Gideon"; that was enough. It gave him pleasure, as he sauntered along, to see the announcement repeated on window cards and hoardings.

Presently he came to a window before which he paused in delighted wonder. It was not a large window; to the casual eye of the passer-by there was little to draw attention. By day it lighted the fractional floor space of a little stationer, who supplemented a slim business by a sub-agency for railroad and steamship lines; but to-night this window seemed the framework of a marvel of coincidence. On the broad, dusty sill inside were propped two cards: the one on the left was his own red-lettered announcement for the week; the one at the right--oh, world of wonders!--was a photogravure of that exact stretch of the inner coast of Florida which Gideon knew best, which was home.

There it was, the Indian River, rippling idly in full sunlight, palmettos leaning over the water, palmettos standing as irregular sentries along the low, reeflike island which stretched away out of the picture. There was the gigantic, lonely pine he knew well, and, yes--he could just make it out--there was his own ramshackle little pier, which stretched in undulating fashion, like a long-legged, wading caterpillar, from the abrupt shore-line of eroded coquina into deep water.

He thought at first that this picture of his home was some new and delicate device put forth by his press-agent. His name on one side of a window, his birthplace upon the other--what could be more tastefully appropriate? Therefore, as he spelled out the reading-matter beneath the photogravure, he was sharply disappointed. It read:

Spend this winter in balmy Florida. Come to the Land of Perpetual Sunshine. Golf, tennis, driving, shooting, boating, fishing, all of the best.

There was more, but he had no heart for it; he was disappointed and puzzled. This picture had, after all, nothing to do with him. It was a chance, and yet, what a strange chance! It troubled and upset him. His black, round-featured face took on deep wrinkles of perplexity. The "misery" which had hung darkly on his horizon for weeks engulfed him without warning. But in the very bitterness of his melancholy he knew at last his disease. It was not champagne or recreation that he needed, not even a "po'k-chop," although his desire for it had been a symptom, a groping for a too homeopathic remedy: he was homesick.

Easy, childish tears came into his eyes, and ran over his shining cheeks. He shivered forlornly with a sudden sense of cold, and absently clutched at the lapels of his gorgeous, fur-lined ulster.

Then in abrupt reaction he laughed aloud, so that the shrill, musical falsetto startled the passers-by, and in another moment a little semicircle of the curious watched spellbound as a black man, exquisitely appareled, danced in wild, loose grace before the dull background of a somewhat grimy and apparently vacant window. A newsboy recognized him.

He heard his name being passed from mouth to mouth, and came partly to his senses. He stopped dancing, and grinned at them.

"Say, you are Gideon, ain't you?" his discoverer demanded, with a sort of reverent audacity.

"Yaas, *seh*," said Gideon; "that's me. Yo' shu got it right." He broke into a joyous peal of laughter--the laughter that had made him famous, and bowed deeply before him. "Gideon--*posi-tive-ly* his las' puffawmunce." Turning, he dashed for a passing trolley, and, still laughing, swung aboard.

He was naturally honest. In a land of easy morality his friends had accounted him something of a paragon; nor had Stuhk ever had



anything but praise for him. But now he crushed aside the ethics of his intent without a single troubled thought. Running away has always been inherent in the negro. He gave one regretful thought to the gorgeous wardrobe he was leaving behind him; but he dared not return for it. Stuhk might have taken it into his head to go back to their rooms. He must content himself with the reflection that he was at that moment wearing his best.

The trolley seemed too slow for him, and, as always happened nowadays, he was recognized; he heard his name whispered, and was aware of the admiring glances of the curious. Even popularity had its drawbacks. He got down in front of a big hotel and chose a taxicab from the waiting rank, exhorting the driver to make his best speed to the station. Leaning back in the soft depths of the cab, he savored his independence, cheered already by the swaying, lurching speed. At the station he tipped the driver in lordly fashion, very much pleased with himself and anxious to give pleasure. Only the sternest prudence and an unconquerable awe of uniform had kept him from tossing bills to the various traffic policemen who had seemed to smile upon his hurry.

No through train left for hours; but after the first disappointment of momentary check, he decided that he was more pleased than otherwise. It would save embarrassment. He was going South, where his color would be more considered than his reputation, and on the little local he chose there was a "Jim Crow" car--one, that is, specially set aside for those of his race. That it proved crowded and full of smoke did not trouble him at all, nor did the admiring pleasantries which the splendor of his apparel immediately called forth. No one knew him; indeed, he was naturally enough mistaken for a prosperous gambler, a not unflattering supposition. In the yard, after the train pulled out, he saw his private car under a glaring arc light, and grinned to see it left behind.

He spent the night pleasantly in a noisy game of high-low-jack, and the next morning slept more soundly than he had slept for weeks,

hunched upon a wooden bench in the boxlike station of a North Carolina junction. The express would have brought him to Jacksonville in twenty-four hours; the journey, as he took it, boarding any local that happened to be going south, and leaving it for meals or sometimes for sleep or often as the whim possessed him, filled five happy days. There he took a night train, and dozed from Jacksonville until a little north of New Smyrna.

He awoke to find it broad daylight, and the car half empty. The train was on a siding, with news of a freight wreck ahead. Gideon stretched himself, and looked out of the window, and emotion seized him. For all his journey the South had seemed to welcome him, but here at last was the country he knew. He went out upon the platform and threw back his head, sniffing the soft breeze, heavy with the mysterious thrill of unplowed acres, the wondrous existence of primordial jungle, where life has rioted unceasingly above unceasing decay. It was dry with the fine dust of waste places, and wet with the warm mists of slumbering swamps; it seemed to Gideon to tremble with the songs of birds, the dry murmur of palm leaves, and the almost inaudible whisper of the gray moss that festooned the live-oaks.

"Um-m-m," he murmured, apostrophizing it, "yo' 's the right kind o' breeze, yo' is. Yo'-all's healthy." Still sniffing, he climbed down to the dusty road-bed.

The negroes who had ridden with him were sprawled about him on the ground; one of them lay sleeping, face up, in the sunlight. The train had evidently been there for some time, and there were no signs of an immediate departure. He bought some oranges of a little, bowlegged black boy, and sat down on a log to eat them and to give up his mind to enjoyment. The sun was hot upon him, and his thoughts were vague and drowsy. He was glad that he was alive, glad to be back once more among familiar scenes. Down the length of the train he saw white passengers from the Pullmans restlessly pacing up and down, getting into their cars and out of them, consulting watches, attaching

themselves with gesticulatory expostulation to various officials; but their impatience found no echo in his thought. What was the hurry? There was plenty of time. It was sufficient to have come to his own land; the actual walls of home could wait. The delay was pleasant, with its opportunity for drowsy sunning, its relief from the grimy monotony of travel. He glanced at the orange-colored "Jim Crow" with distaste, and inspiration, dawning slowly upon him, swept all other thought before it in its great and growing glory.

A brakeman passed, and Gideon leaped to his feet and pursued him.

"Misteh, how long yo'-all reckon this train goin' to be?"

"About an hour."

The question had been a mere matter of form. Gideon had made up his mind, and if he had been told that they started in five minutes he would not have changed it. He climbed back into the car for his coat and his hat, and then almost furtively stole down the steps again and slipped quietly into the palmetto scrub.

"Most made the mistake of ma life," he chuckled, "stickin' to that ol' train foheveh. 'T isn't the right way at, all foh Gideon to come home."

The river was not far away. He could catch the dancing blue of it from time to time in ragged vista, and for this beacon he steered directly. His coat was heavy on his arm, his thin patent-leather ties pinched and burned and demanded detours around swampy places, but he was happy.

As he went along, his plan perfected itself. He would get into loose shoes again, old ones, if money could buy them, and old clothes, too. The bull-briers snatching at his tailored splendor suggested that.

He laughed when the Florida partridge, a small quail, whirred up from under his feet; he paused to exchange affectionate mockery with red squirrels; and once, even when he was brought up suddenly to a familiar and ominous, dry reverberation, the small, crisp sound of the rolling drums of death, he did not look about him for some instrument of destruction, as at any other time he would have done, but instead peered cautiously over the log before him, and spoke in tolerant admonition:

"Now, Misteh Rattlesnake, yo' jes min' yo' own business. Nobody's goin' step on yo', ner go triflin' roun' yo' in no way whatsomeveh. Yo' jes lay there in the sun an' git 's fat 's yo' please. Don' yo' tu'n yo' weeked li'l' eyes on Gideon. He's jes goin' 'long home, an' ain' lookin' foh no muss."

He came presently to the water, and, as luck would have it, to a little group of negro cabins, where he was able to buy old clothes and, after much dickering, a long and somewhat leaky rowboat rigged out with a tattered leg-of-mutton sail. This he provisioned with a jug of water, a starch box full of white corn-meal, and a wide strip of lean razorback bacon.

As he pushed out from shore and set his sail to the small breeze that blew down from the north, an absolute contentment possessed him. The idle waters of the lagoon, lying without tide or current in eternal indolence, rippled and sparkled in breeze and sunlight with a merry surface activity, and seemed to lap the leaky little boat more swiftly on its way. Mosquito Inlet opened broadly before him, and skirting the end of Merritt's Island he came at last into that longest lagoon, with which he was most familiar, the Indian River. Here the wind died down to a mere breath, which barely kept his boat in motion; but he made no attempt to row. As long as he moved at all, he was satisfied. He was living the fulfilment of his dreams in exile, lounging in the stern in the ancient clothes he had purchased, his feet stretched comfortably before him in their broken shoes, one foot upon a thwart,

the other hanging overside so laxly that occasional ripples lapped the run-over heel. From time to time he scanned shore and river for familiar points of interest--some remembered snag that showed the tip of one gnarled branch. Or he marked a newly fallen palmetto, already rotting in the water, which must be added to that map of vast detail that he carried in his head. But for the most part his broad black face was turned up to the blue brilliance above him in unblinking contemplation; his keen eyes, brilliant despite their sun-muddied whites, reveled in the heights above him, swinging from horizon to horizon in the wake of an orderly file of little bluebill ducks, winging their way across the river, or brightening with interest at the rarer sight of a pair of mallards or redheads, lifting with the soaring circles of the great bald-headed eagle, or following the scattered squadron of heron--white heron, blue heron, young and old, trailing, sunlit, brilliant patches, clear even against the bright white and blue of the sky above them.

Often he laughed aloud, sending a great shout of mirth across the water in fresh relish of those comedies best known and best enjoyed. It was as excruciatingly funny as it had ever been, when his boat nosed its way into a great flock of ducks idling upon the water, to see the mad paddling haste of those nearest him, the reproachful turn of their heads, or, if he came too near, their spattering run out of water, feet and wings pumping together as they rose from the surface, looking for all the world like fat little women, scurrying with clutched skirts across city streets. The pelicans, too, delighted him as they perched with pedantic solemnity upon wharf-piles, or sailed in hunched and huddled gravity twenty feet above the river's surface in swift, dignified flight, which always ended suddenly in an abrupt, up-ended plunge that threw dignity to the winds in its greedy haste, and dropped them crashing into the water.

When darkness came suddenly at last, he made in toward shore, mooring to the warm-fretted end of a fallen and forgotten landing. A straggling orange-grove was here, broken lines of vanquished

cultivation, struggling little trees swathed and choked in the festooning gray moss, still showing here and there the valiant golden gleam of fruit. Gideon had seen many such places, had seen settlers come and clear themselves a space in the jungle, plant their groves, and live for a while in lazy independence; and then for some reason or other they would go, and before they had scarcely turned their backs, the jungle had crept in again, patiently restoring its ancient sovereignty. The place was eery with the ghost of dead effort; but it pleased him.

He made a fire and cooked supper, eating enormously and with relish. His conscience did not trouble him at all. Stuhk and his own career seemed already distant; they took small place in his thoughts, and served merely as a background for his present absolute content. He picked some oranges, and ate them in meditative enjoyment. For a while he nodded, half asleep, beside his fire, watching the darkened river, where the mullet, shimmering with phosphorescence, still leaped starkly above the surface, and fell in spattering brilliance. Midnight found him sprawled asleep beside his fire.

Once he awoke. The moon had risen, and a little breeze waved the hanging moss, and whispered in the glossy foliage of orange and palmetto with a sound like falling rain. Gideon sat up and peered about him, rolling his eyes hither and thither at the menacing leap and dance of the jet shadows. His heart was beating thickly, his muscles twitched, and the awful terrors of night pulsed and shuddered over him. Nameless specters peered at him from every shadow, ingenerate familiars of his wild, forgotten blood. He groaned aloud in a delicious terror; and presently, still twitching and shivering, fell asleep again. It was as if something magical had happened; his fear remembered the fear of centuries, and yet with the warm daylight was absolutely forgotten.

He got up a little after sunrise, and went down to the river to bathe, diving deep with a joyful sense of freeing himself from the last alien

dust of travel. Once ashore again, however, he began to prepare his breakfast with some haste. For the first time in his journey he was feeling a sense of loneliness and a longing for his kind. He was still happy, but his laughter began to seem strange to him in the solitude. He tried the defiant experiment of laughing for the effect of it, an experiment which brought him to his feet in startled terror; for his laughter was echoed. As he stood peering about him, the sound came again, not laughter this time, but a suppressed giggle. It was human beyond a doubt. Gideon's face shone with relief and sympathetic amusement; he listened for a moment, and then strode surely forward toward a clump of low palms. There he paused, every sense alert. His ear caught a soft rustle, a little gasp of fear; the sound of a foot moved cautiously.

"Missy," he said tentatively, "I reckon yo'-all's come jes 'bout 'n time foh breakfus. Yo' betteh have some. Ef yo' ain' too white to sit down with a black man."

The leaves parted, and a smiling face as black as Gideon's own regarded him in shy amusement.

"Who is yo', man?"

"I mought be king of Kongo," he laughed, "but I ain't. Yo' see befo' yo' jes Gideon--at yo'r 'steemed sehvice." He bowed elaborately in the mock humility of assured importance, watching her face in pleasant anticipation.

But neither awe nor rapture dawned there. She repeated the name, inclining her head coquettishly; but it evidently meant nothing to her. She was merely trying its sound. "Gideon, Gideon. I don' call to min' any sech name ez that. Yo'-all's f'om up No'th likely." He was beyond the reaches of fame.

"No," said Gideon, hardly knowing whether he was glad or sorry--  
"no, I live south of heah. What-all's yo' name?"

The girl giggled deliciously.

"Man," she said, "I shu got the mos' reediculoustest name you eveh did heah. They call me Vashti--yo' bacon's bu'nin'." She stepped out, and ran past him to snatch his skillet deftly from the fire.

"Vashti"--a strange and delightful name. Gideon followed her slowly. Her romantic coming and her romantic name pleased him; and, too, he thought her beautiful. She was scarcely more than a girl, slim and strong and almost of his own height. She was barefooted, but her blue-checked gingham was clean and belted smartly about a small waist. He remembered only one woman who ran as lithely as she did, one of the numerous "diving beauties" of the vaudeville stage.

She cooked their breakfast, but he served her with an elaborate gallantry, putting forward all his new and foreign graces, garnishing his speech with imposing polysyllables, casting about their picnic breakfast a radiant aura of grandeur borrowed from the recent days of his fame. And he saw that he pleased her, and with her open admiration essayed still greater flights of polished manner.

He made vague plans for delaying his journey as they sat smoking in pleasant conversational ease; and when an interruption came it vexed him.

"Vashty! Vashty!" a woman's voice sounded thin and far away.  
"Vashty-y! Yo' heah me, chile?"

Vashti rose to her feet with a sigh.

"That's my ma," she said regretfully.



"What do yo' care?" asked Gideon. "Let her yell awhile."

The girl shook her head.

"Ma's a moughty pow'ful 'oman, and she done got a club 'bout the size o' my wrist." She moved off a step or so, and glanced back at him.

Gideon leaped to his feet.

"When yo' comin' back? Yo'--yo' ain' goin' without----" He held out his arms to her, but she only giggled and began to walk slowly away. With a bound he was after her, one hand catching her lightly by the shoulder. He felt suddenly that he must not lose sight of her.

"Let me go! Tu'n me loose, yo'!" The girl was still laughing, but evidently troubled. She wrenched herself away with an effort, only to be caught again a moment later. She screamed and struck at him as he kissed her; for now she was really in terror.

The blow caught Gideon squarely in the mouth, and with such force that he staggered back, astonished, while the girl took wildly to her heels. He stood for a moment irresolute, for something was happening to him. For months he had evaded love with a gentle embarrassment; now, with the savage crash of that blow, he knew unreasoningly that he had found his woman.

He leaped after her again, running as he had not run in years, in savage, determined pursuit, tearing through brier and scrub, tripping, falling, rising, never losing sight of the blue-clad figure before him until at last she tripped and fell, and he stood panting above her.

He took a great breath or so, and leaned over and picked her up in his arms, where she screamed and struck and scratched at him. He laughed, for he felt no longer sensible to pain, and, still chuckling, picked his way carefully back to the shore, wading deep into the water

to unmoor his boat. Then with a swift movement he dropped the girl into the bow, pushed free, and clambered actively aboard.

The light, early morning breeze had freshened, and he made out well toward the middle of the river, never even glancing around at the sound of the hallooming he now heard from shore. His exertions had quickened his breathing, but he felt strong and joyful. Vashti lay a huddle of blue in the bow, crouched in fear and desolation, shaken and torn with sobbing; but he made no effort to comfort her. He was untroubled by any sense of wrong; he was simply and unreasoningly satisfied with what he had done. Despite all his gentle, easygoing, laughter-loving existence, he found nothing incongruous or unnatural in this sudden act of violence. He was aglow with happiness; he was taking home a wife. The blind tumult of capture had passed; a great tenderness possessed him.

The leaky little boat was plunging and dancing in swift ecstasy of movement; all about them the little waves ran glittering in the sunlight, plashing and slapping against the boat's low side, tossing tiny crests to the following wind, showing rifts of white here and there, blowing handfuls of foam and spray. Gideon went softly about the business of shortening his small sail, and came quietly back to his steering-seat again. Soon he would have to be making for what lea the western shore offered; but he was holding to the middle of the river as long as he could, because with every mile the shores were growing more familiar, calling to him to make what speed he could. Vashti's sobbing had grown small and ceased; he wondered if she had fallen asleep.

Presently, however, he saw her face raised--a face still shining with tears. She saw that he was watching her, and crouched low again. A dash of spray splattered over her, and she looked up frightened, glancing fearfully overside; then once more her eyes came back to him, and this time she got up, still small and crouching, and made her way slowly and painfully down the length of the boat, until at last

Gideon moved aside for her, and she sank in the bottom beside him, hiding her eyes in her gingham sleeve.

Gideon stretched out a broad hand and touched her head lightly; and with a tiny gasp her fingers stole up to his.

"Honey," said Gideon--"Honey, yo' ain' mad, is yo'?"

She shook her head, not looking at him.

"Yo' ain' grievin' foh yo' ma?"

Again she shook her head.

"Because," said Gideon, smiling down at her, "I ain' got no beeg club like she has."

A soft and smothered giggle answered him, and this time Vashti looked up and laid her head against him with a small sigh of contentment.

Gideon felt very tender, very important, at peace with himself and all the world. He rounded a jutting point, and stretched out a black hand, pointing.