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The Undoing of Mrs. Rastus

All on Account of a Photograph

By EDWIN FAIRFAX MAULTY
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I am not writing a tract, so you must find your own moral to this tale. Lombard street has passed upon it and the verdict—but this is how it happened.

A fire had eaten up half a lumber yard in that mysterious section of Philadelphia called "downtown."

When the city editor of the Globe reached his office at 1 o'clock, the first thing he did was to assign Watson to cover the fire.

He told Watson to take along a photographer and to have his copy in early.

Watson went down to the art room and got Pierce. The Globe had just bought a new triplicate action camera with about a dozen improvements, and this Pierce took with him.

Fifteen minutes later the men were at the fire, and Pierce had taken three exposures. That left him one plate.

He arranged to meet Watson in half an hour two squares away.

Watson has nothing more to do with this story, so it does not matter whether he kept his appointment or not.

Pierce amused himself on the corner watching the passersby for awhile, but he soon tired of that and fell to speculating on the result of his exhibition of prints at the next showing of the Photograph club.

Suddenly he heard that peculiar clicking noise made by some persons when they are confronted with something out of the ordinary.

He turned round and saw standing on the corner Mrs. Rastus.

On her head was poised the basket in which she had brought some washing to a family who lived near by. On either side of the basket were placed her upturned hands supporting it.

Her face, black as graphite, shone with a dozen emotions as she looked



HE CONFRONTED HER WITH THE PICTURE.

down the street where the fire was thrusting great swords of flame to the sky only to abate them the next moment in twisting scabbards of rolling smoke.

Pierce looked at her, and in a moment came his inspiration.

Mrs. Rastus, spellbound at the sight before her, did not notice the big black box being swung into position, nor did she hear the click the shutter made or the satisfied sigh of security vented by Pierce.

Pierce hesitated a moment, his right hand fingering the change pocket of his coat. Evidently he thought better of his intention, for he suddenly boarded a trolley car which came by at the moment.

Next morning the Globe had the best pictures of the fire printed by any newspaper. The managing editor, looking at the half tones, thought that after all, the head of the art department was wise in insisting on the purchase of the new camera.

So did Pierce in his own little dark room at his home as he carefully developed a negative.

The exhibition of the Photograph club was a great success. Camera men and enthusiasts raved over it.

But they exhausted all their superlatives in adjectival praise of the star exhibit made by J. Coolidge Pierce. It was a remarkable photograph and was quite the feature of the exhibition. On its dark black frame was the single word "Voodoo."

The face of the negro was a study. She stood with upturned hands as if invoking all the terrors of the nether world, and on her face was an expression that was as mysterious as the subject.

Then Pierce would smile in a knowing way. He did not think it necessary to explain nor to tell how his skillful manipulation of the negative had obliterated the bloody hand.

The owner of a show on Chestnut street in an idle moment wondered

how the show of the Photograph club. The picture had its spell on him, as it had done on others.

Three days afterward Pierce bought a new wide angle lens he had banked after for a year. He also deposited \$50 in the care of the receiving teller of a bank that accepted small accounts.

Pierce was a New Englander and combined thrift with the pursuit of art.

The Chestnut street merchant put the "Voodoo" in a six inch wide silver frame. One of his two windows he draped in black velvet, and at the end of a long perspective he placed the picture.

This was done at night. The next morning the curious ones almost blocked the pave.

The clerks told inquirers that the picture was not for sale at any price. The merchant, who also combined thrift with art, reaped the benefit of a huge advertisement which he had figured on.

Two nights later Alcibiades Paige of Lombard street took a stroll on Chestnut street.

Alcibiades had "belonged" to the Paiges of Virginia. He tolerated the shortening of his first name into Al, but the omission of the letter "i" in his last one excited his ire.

He was the philosopher and general oracle of Lombard street and it was whispered knew something about "black art."

If the "Voodoo" was impressive by day she was doubly so at night. She burst on the amazed vision of Alcibiades with a dramatic surprise that brought him to a sudden halt.

For fifteen minutes he never moved. Then he wrenched himself away and went to Lombard street.

His interview with Mrs. Rastus was not a satisfactory one. Finally he prevailed on her to go with him to Chestnut street.

As she wound a shawl about her head Rastus, lying asleep on the lounge, stirred and drowsily asked: "What yo' gwine, Lisa?"

"Jes' gwine ter th' sto'."

Mr. Paige brought all his art to bear on Mrs. Rastus on the way to Chestnut street, but she was obstinate. She would neither deny nor affirm.

Eventually he confronted her with the picture. The expression of her face when she saw the photograph was convincing to Alcibiades.

The original and the counterfeit stared at each other with equal look.

Alcibiades' peroration was conclusive. Said he:

"Thas ain't no use en denyin' et. Thas yo' be. Et et wah a painted picture Et mought hev mah doubts. But this yer's a photygraf, an' they don't lie."

Suddenly a great light broke on Mrs. Rastus. She had laid work to keep it to herself, but she did.

Two days later Lombard street was astonished to find that the sign "Washin' done Here" had disappeared from the front of Mrs. Rastus' house and that it was replaced by a staring yellow one bearing the inscription: "Mrs. Jones, Voodoo."

Rastus was even more astonished than the neighbors.

His wife informed him in decisive manner that she had done with washing. He threatened, he raved, he expostulated, but to the black Gibraltar sitting in state in the "parlor," which she had draped with black alpaca, his words were as the idle wind.

Rastus stood it for four days, then he got a "job" at the salt works, the first he had taken in seven years. Also he went to board with a neighbor.

Lombard street first looked with awe on the sign. But, after a few days, an adventurous woman, driven to desperate courage by the scorn of a mulatto longshoreman, called on Mrs. Jones. A week later she and the longshoreman were married.

But, though the sign still blazons its yellow tidings to the public, Mrs. Jones is in a bad way. The longshoreman's wife is an ardent disciple, yet Mrs. Jones failed to cure Pete Blenkin's broken leg, and he had to go to the hospital. Minnie Hunt's husband died of pneumonia in summer, despite the fact that she paid six silver dollars to the "Voodoo" for his recovery.

Sam Wilson was arrested for playing policy. He had paid \$10 to Mrs. Jones, but the police seemed unaware of that fact and haled him off just the same.

Mrs. Jones "voodoed" seven candles. Nevertheless one of the Wilson twins died from the measles and the other is partially blind.

Then Lombard street arose in wrath. It did nothing severe. It simply refused to have anything further to do with Mrs. Jones. And it talked about her.

Things went on for a time, and then one morning Lombard street awoke to find that the yellow sign had disappeared and that inside the window of the parlor hung the usual legend: "Washin' done Here."

But Lombard street would have none of it.

Little black and yellow urchins stood in front of the house and cast gibes at its inmates. They followed her on the street, and a convenient stone at times gave rebuff point to their scorn.

Even Rastus, appeared to secretly at night, refused to harken to the wife of his bosom and shook in her face with defiance the sign he had saved.

I do not know what is going to become of Mrs. Rastus. Pierce has gone over to New York to work for one of the newspapers there. The Chestnut street merchant is in Europe.

But the photograph, in its silver frame, from the wall of his library hangs to this day. The light coming through the window every time but unknown tells her to look at the picture.

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