

# **The Quest of the Silver Fleece**

By

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## The Quest of the Silver Fleece

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## Note from the Author

TO ONE

whose name may not be written but to whose tireless  
faith the shaping of these cruder thoughts to forms  
more fitly perfect is doubtless due, this  
finished work is herewith dedicated

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### *Note*

He who would tell a tale must look toward three ideals: to tell it well, to tell it beautifully, and to tell the truth.

The first is the Gift of God, the second is the Vision of Genius, but the third is the Reward of Honesty.

In *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* there is little, I ween, divine or ingenious; but, at least, I have been honest. In no fact or picture have I consciously set down aught the counterpart of which I have not seen or known; and whatever the finished picture may lack of completeness, this lack is due now to the story-teller, now to the artist, but never to the herald of the Truth.

NEW YORK CITY

*August 15, 1911*

THE AUTHOR

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## **One: DREAMS**

Night fell. The red waters of the swamp grew sinister and sullen. The tall pines lost their slimness and stood in wide blurred blotches all across the way, and a great shadowy bird arose, wheeled and melted, murmuring, into the black-green sky.

The boy wearily dropped his heavy bundle and stood still, listening as the voice of crickets split the shadows and made the silence audible. A tear wandered down his brown cheek. They were at supper now, he whispered—the father and old mother, away back yonder beyond the night. They were far away; they would never be as near as once they had been, for he had stepped into the world. And the cat and Old Billy—ah, but the world was a lonely thing, so wide and tall and empty! And so bare, so bitter bare! Somehow he had never dreamed of the world as lonely before; he had fared forth to beckoning hands and luring, and to the eager hum of human voices, as of some great, swelling music.

Yet now he was alone; the empty night was closing all about him here in a strange land, and he was afraid. The bundle with his earthly treasure had hung heavy and heavier on his shoulder; his little horde of money was tightly wadded in his sock, and the school lay hidden somewhere far away in the shadows. He wondered how far it was; he looked and harkened, starting at his own heartbeats, and fearing more and more the long dark fingers of the night.

Then of a sudden up from the darkness came music. It was human music, but of a wildness and a weirdness that startled the boy as it fluttered and danced across the dull red waters of the swamp. He hesitated, then impelled by some strange power, left the highway and slipped into the forest of the swamp, shrinking, yet following the song hungrily and half forgetting his fear. A harsher, shriller note struck in as of many and ruder voices; but above it flew the first sweet music, birdlike, abandoned, and the boy crept closer.

The cabin crouched ragged and black at the edge of black waters. An old chimney leaned drunkenly against it, raging with fire and smoke, while through the chinks winked red gleams of warmth and wild cheer. With a revel of shouting and noise, the music suddenly ceased. Hoarse staccato cries and peals of laughter shook the old hut, and as the boy stood there peering through the black trees, abruptly the door flew open and a flood of light illumined the wood.

Amid this mighty halo, as on clouds of flame, a girl was dancing. She was black, and lithe, and tall, and willowy. Her garments twined and flew around the delicate moulding of her dark, young, half-naked limbs. A heavy mass of hair clung motionless to her wide forehead. Her arms twirled and flickered, and body and soul seemed quivering and whirring in the poetry of her motion.

As she danced she sang. He heard her voice as before, fluttering like a bird's in the full sweetness of her utter music. It was no tune nor melody, it was just formless, boundless music. The boy forgot himself and all the world besides. All his darkness was sudden light; dazzled he crept forward, bewildered, fascinated, until with one last wild whirl the elf-girl paused. The crimson light fell full upon the warm and velvet bronze of her face—her midnight eyes were aglow, her full purple lips apart, her half hid bosom panting, and all the music dead. Involuntarily the boy gave a gasping cry and awoke to swamp and night and fire, while a white face, drawn, red-eyed, peered outward from some hidden throng within the cabin.

"Who's that?" a harsh voice cried.

"Where?" "Who is it?" and pale crowding faces blurred the light.

The boy wheeled blindly and fled in terror stumbling through the swamp, hearing strange sounds and feeling stealthy creeping hands and arms and whispering voices. On he toiled in mad haste, struggling toward the road and losing it until finally beneath the shadows of a mighty oak he sank exhausted. There he lay a while trembling and at last drifted into dreamless sleep.

It was morning when he awoke and threw a startled glance upward to the twisted branches of the oak that bent above, sifting down sunshine on his brown face and close curled hair. Slowly he remembered the loneliness, the fear and wild running through the dark. He laughed in the bold courage of day and stretched himself.

Then suddenly he bethought him again of that vision of the night—the waving arms and flying limbs of the girl, and her great black eyes looking into the night and calling him. He could hear her now, and hear that wondrous savage music. Had it been real? Had he dreamed? Or had it been some witch-vision of the night, come to tempt and lure him to his undoing? Where was that black and flaming cabin? Where was the girl—the soul that had called him? *She* must have been real; she had to live and dance and sing; he must again look into the mystery of her great eyes. And he sat up in sudden determination, and, lo! gazed straight into the very eyes of his dreaming.

She sat not four feet from him, leaning against the great tree, her eyes now languorously abstracted, now alert and quizzical with mischief. She seemed but half-clothed, and her warm, dark flesh peeped furtively through the rent gown; her thick, crisp hair was frowsy and rumpled, and the long curves of her bare young arms gleamed in the morning sunshine, glowing with vigor and life. A little mocking smile came and sat upon her lips.

"What you run for?" she asked, with dancing mischief in her eyes.

"Because—" he hesitated, and his cheeks grew hot.

"I knows," she said, with impish glee, laughing low music.

"Why?" he challenged, sturdily.

"You was a-feared."

He bridled. "Well, I reckon you'd be a-feared if you was caught out in the black dark all alone."

"Pooh!" she scoffed and hugged her knees. "Pooh! I've stayed out all alone heaps o' nights."

He looked at her with a curious awe.

"I don't believe you," he asserted; but she tossed her head and her eyes grew scornful.

"Who's a-feared of the dark? I love night." Her eyes grew soft.

He watched her silently, till, waking from her daydream, she abruptly asked:

"Where you from?"

"Georgia."

"Where's that?"

He looked at her in surprise, but she seemed matter-of-fact.

"It's away over yonder," he answered.

"Behind where the sun comes up?"

"Oh, no!"

"Then it ain't so far," she declared. "I knows where the sun rises, and I knows where it sets." She looked up at its gleaming splendor glinting through the leaves, and, noting its height, announced abruptly:

"I'se hungry."

"So'm I," answered the boy, fumbling at his bundle; and then, timidly: "Will you eat with me?"

"Yes," she said, and watched him with eager eyes.

Untying the strips of cloth, he opened his box, and disclosed chicken and biscuits, ham and corn-bread. She clapped her hands in glee.

"Is there any water near?" he asked.

Without a word, she bounded up and flitted off like a brown bird, gleaming dull-golden in the sun, glancing in and out among the trees, till she paused above a tiny black pool, and then came tripping and swaying back with hands held cupwise and dripping with cool water.

"Drink," she cried. Obediently he bent over the little hands that seemed so soft and thin. He took a deep draught; and then to drain the last drop, his hands touched hers and the shock of flesh first meeting flesh startled them both, while the water rained through. A moment their eyes looked deep into each other's—a timid, startled gleam in hers; a wonder in his. Then she said dreamily:

"We've known us all our lives, and—before, ain't we?"

He hesitated.

"Ye—es—I reckon," he slowly returned. And then, brightening, he asked gayly: "And we'll be friends always, won't we?"

"Yes," she said at last, slowly and solemnly, and another brief moment they stood still.

Then the mischief danced in her eyes, and a song bubbled on her lips. She hopped to the tree.

"Come—eat!" she cried. And they nestled together amid the big black roots of the oak, laughing and talking while they ate.

"What's over there?" he asked pointing northward.

"Cresswell's big house."

"And yonder to the west?"

"The school."

He started joyfully.

"The school! What school?"

"Old Miss' School."

"Miss Smith's school?"

"Yes." The tone was disdainful.

"Why, that's where I'm going. I was a-feared it was a long way off; I must have passed it in the night."

"I hate it!" cried the girl, her lips tense.

"But I'll be so near," he explained. "And why do you hate it?"

"Yes—you'll be near," she admitted; "that'll be nice; but—" she glanced westward, and the fierce look faded. Soft joy crept to her face again, and she sat once more dreaming.

"Yon way's nicest," she said.

"Why, what's there?"

"The swamp," she said mysteriously.

"And what's beyond the swamp?"

She crouched beside him and whispered in eager, tense tones: "Dreams!"

He looked at her, puzzled.

"Dreams?" vaguely—"dreams? Why, dreams ain't—nothing."

"Oh, yes they is!" she insisted, her eyes flaming in misty radiance as she sat staring beyond the shadows of the swamp. "Yes they is! There ain't nothing but dreams—that is, nothing much.

"And over yonder behind the swamps is great fields full of dreams, piled high and burning; and right amongst them the sun, when he's tired o' night, whispers and drops red things, 'cept when devils make 'em black."

The boy stared at her; he knew not whether to jeer or wonder.

"How you know?" he asked at last, skeptically.

"Promise you won't tell?"

"Yes," he answered.

She cuddled into a little heap, nursing her knees, and answered slowly.

"I goes there sometimes. I creeps in 'mongst the dreams; they hangs there like big flowers, dripping dew and sugar and blood—red, red blood. And there's little fairies there that hop about and sing, and devils—great, ugly devils that grabs at you and roasts and eats you if they gits you; but they don't git me. Some devils is big and white, like ha'nts;



some is long and shiny, like creepy, slippery snakes; and some is little and broad and black, and they yells—"

The boy was listening in incredulous curiosity, half minded to laugh, half minded to edge away from the black-red radiance of yonder dusky swamp. He glanced furtively backward, and his heart gave a great bound.

"Some is little and broad and black, and they yells—" chanted the girl. And as she chanted, deep, harsh tones came booming through the forest:

*"Zo-ra! Zo-ra! O—o—oh, Zora!"*

He saw far behind him, toward the shadows of the swamp, an old woman—short, broad, black and wrinkled, with fangs and pendulous lips and red, wicked eyes. His heart bounded in sudden fear; he wheeled toward the girl, and caught only the uncertain flash of her garments—the wood was silent, and he was alone.

He arose, startled, quickly gathered his bundle, and looked around him. The sun was strong and high, the morning fresh and vigorous. Stamping one foot angrily, he strode jauntily out of the wood toward the big road.

But ever and anon he glanced curiously back. Had he seen a haunt? Or was the elf-girl real? And then he thought of her words:

"We've known us all our lives."

## Two: The School

Day was breaking above the white buildings of the Negro school and throwing long, low lines of gold in at Miss Sarah Smith's front window. She lay in the stupor of her last morning nap, after a night of harrowing worry. Then, even as she partially awoke, she lay still with closed eyes, feeling the shadow of some great burden, yet daring not to rouse herself and recall its exact form; slowly again she drifted toward unconsciousness.

"*Bang! bang! bang!*" hard knuckles were beating upon the door below.

She heard drowsily, and dreamed that it was the nailing up of all her doors; but she did not care much, and but feebly warded the blows away, for she was very tired.

"*Bang! bang! bang!*" persisted the hard knuckles.

She started up, and her eye fell upon a letter lying on her bureau. Back she sank with a sigh, and lay staring at the ceiling—a gaunt, flat, sad-eyed creature, with wisps of gray hair half-covering her baldness, and a face furrowed with care and gathering years.

It was thirty years ago this day, she recalled, since she first came to this broad land of shade and shine in Alabama to teach black folks.

It had been a hard beginning with suspicion and squalor around; with poverty within and without the first white walls of the new school home. Yet somehow the struggle then with all its helplessness and disappointment had not seemed so bitter as today: then failure meant but little, now it seemed to mean everything; then it meant disappointment to a score of ragged urchins, now it meant two hundred boys and girls, the spirits of a thousand gone before and the hopes of thousands to come. In her imagination the significance of these half dozen gleaming buildings perched aloft seemed portentous—big with the destiny not simply of a county and a State, but of a race—a nation—a world. It was God's own cause, and yet—

"*Bang! bang! bang!*" again went the hard knuckles down there at the front.

Miss Smith slowly arose, shivering a bit and wondering who could possibly be rapping at that time in the morning. She sniffed the chilling air and was sure she caught some lingering perfume from Mrs. Vanderpool's gown. She had brought this rich and rare-apparelled lady up here yesterday, because it was more private, and here she had poured forth her needs. She had talked long and in deadly earnest. She had not spoken of the endowment for which she had hoped so desperately during a quarter of a century—no, only for the five thousand dollars to buy the long needed new land. It was so little—so little beside what this woman squandered—

The insistent knocking was repeated louder than before.

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