

Ring Out Wild Belles

Archie P. McKishnie

Illustrated by

E.J. Dinsmore

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RING OUT WILD BELLES

By ARCHIE P. McKISHNIE

ILLUSTRATED BY E. J. DINSMORE

That Beauty Contest seemed to spell ruin for Excelsior Secret Brotherhood, prosperity for the "Freed Children of Africa." But that was counting without Len Ballister.

I

Through a draughty chink in the stable door, Len Ballister, champion stave-cutter, diplomat and constable of Chatville East, could command a perfect view of the place of his adoption, scintillating in garb of winter's snow. Also by manipulating his long neck slightly he could command one of the cabins—owned by himself, but managed by Jane-Ann, the partner of his joys and sorrows. A man may not own a horse and still need a stable. Len was one of those men. Frequently he found it necessary, following one of those arguments with his better-half, which sprang suddenly up as a squall at sea, to take protection behind this door, which, fortunately, latched from the inside.

Orinoco, the hound pup, having seen the cause of this morning's domestic flurry, had, with a wisdom born of close association with trouble, wisely headed the procession of two through the drifts to this chill but safe sanctuary. Now he sat on a pile of straw and wept silently while Len, eye to the chink, reconnoitered and planned a speedy getaway.

“Dat wumman,” ruminated Len, as he gazed outward, “am so contrary dat if ever she climbs de shiny ladder ter heaben one half ob her’ll kick de udder half down ag’in. Neber seen her likes, nohow.”

Orinoco, taking heart of grace from his master’s voice, whined pleadingly.

Len turned upon him. “Yo’ long-eared, wet-eyed son ob sin!” he addressed him. “Yo’ bow-legged, pot-bellied skin ob a howl, yo’! Fer two cents I’d bus’ yo’ so wide open yo’d fink yo’ was a hair door-mat. What yo’ mean by stealin’ de meat off de platter an’ hidin’ it un’er my chair, anyways?”

Orinoco whimpered cringingly.

“Yo’ orter knowed she’d blame it all onter me.”

The dog writhed abjectly in the straw. Len’s stern face relaxed in a grin.

“Yo’ kin t’ank yo’r stars it was Jane-Ann’s chops ’stead ob mine, yo’ stole. Dat’s all dat saves yo’ from sudden deaf, dawg.”

Orinoco squirmed erect and wagged his tail. He had learned to read Len’s countenance and knew forgiveness was not far off.

Lennox climbed up on an empty oat-box, from a pocket drew a letter which had been forwarded to him for attention from the Chatville chief of police, and read it over carefully for the third time.

“Dat’s all right,” he soliloquized, having finished the perusal. “I’ll keep an eye out fer dis pusson herein described, but not till af’er Christmas day. Dis ain’t no season ob year ter be bowin’ neef de load of detectibility, nohow. When I man-hunts, I man-hunts. When I celebrates, I celebrates. Two don’t nohow mix.”

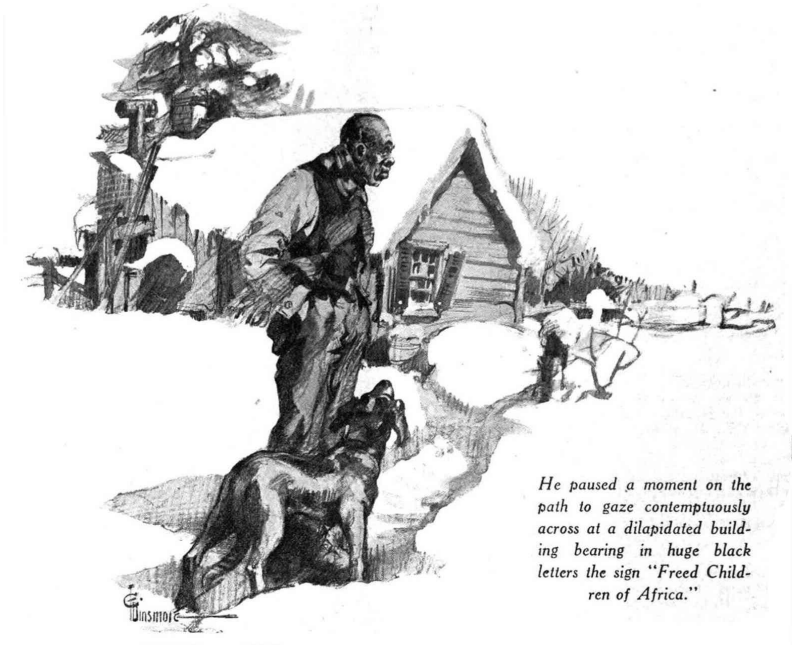
He got down from the box, patted Orinoco forgivingly, allowed him to caress his ear, then went back to the chink in the door.

“Orinoco,” he whispered, “Jane-Ann’s goin’ out. Dat’s what I calls lucky.”

Silence for a spell, then, “Her’s lockin’ de door af’er her, Orinoco. Dat’s what I calls *onlucky*.”

Len was about to remove his optic from the crack in the door when he discerned a tall negro dressed in fur-lined overcoat and silk hat approaching in a jaunty stride up the street.

"Dat Chicago false alarm sure gibes me a pain," he muttered. "Laws sake, look at him strut. Finks jes' 'cause he's Gran' Organizer ob dat new lodge he's startin' here, he's de king ob Egypt an' Great Britainny. I bet a cookie he's on his way down ter Homer Hudson's place. He's goin' ter get Homer ter do sumfin' fer him; maybe finance dis here Beauty Contes' he's promotin' on Christmas eve. Dat's it, fer shore. An' pore Homer's boun' ter fall fer his smooth talk. I'll jes' go up, break inter my house, finish my breakfas', an' den I'll traipse 'long ober ter Homer's an' fin' out all 'bout it."



Len called Orinoco, unlocked the barn door, and peered cautiously out. A blast of icy wind smote him in the eyes and brought the tears. He paused a moment on the path to gaze contemptuously across at a dilapidated building bearing in huge black letters the sign *Freed Children of Africa*; then he went on to the cabin.

Meanwhile Mr. Eli Rodgers, Grand Organizer of the society known as the Freed Children of Africa, proceeded on his way to the domicile of Homer Hudson, champion pugilist of Kent County, and all round sport.

He knocked softly on the door and smiled benignly up into the forbidding countenance of Homer.

“Brudder Hudson, I’s right glad ter fin’ yo’ ter hum.”

Homer nodded, crawfished backward a step, and waved his visitor inside. Organizer Rodgers seated himself, unbuttoned his fur-lined coat and laid his silk hat on the table.

“We’re goin’ ter hab a gran’ contes’ on Chris’mas eve, Brudder Hudson,” he remarked, “t’anks to de interest sech prominent citzens as yo’rse’f are takin’ in de Freed Children ob Africa Society. When de belle ob Bridgetown an’ de belle ob Chatville East meet on dat night, ter pit dere respective cha’ms, dere’s goin’ ter be a wil’ time.”

Homer allowed the scowling suspicion in his face to relax.

“Dere’ll be wil’ words too, if so I knows dem two females,” he said. “Dere’ll be scratchin’ an’ ha’r-pullin’ if Sally Jones an’ Libby Parker am allowed ter get close togedder. I’m tellin’ yo’ dat.”

Organizer Rodgers took a huge gold watch from the pocket of his white vest and consulted it.

“I got but a minute er so to tarry wif yo’, brudder. May I ast yo’ one er two questions?”

“Pervidin’ they’s not too pussonal,” Homer agreed. “What yo’ wanten know?”

Rodgers produced two cigars, handed Homer one of them and lit the other.

“Concernin’ dis man Lennox Ballister,” he said. “Is he to be treated, brudder?”

“Not by no means,” answered Homer promptly. “Dat Len’s so crooked he’d steal dat imitation mink linin’ outer dat coat yo’re wearin’ an’ sell it fer Persian lamb.”

“Den my summin’ up ob him has been correc’, brudder. I jedged him ter be a ha’mless, happy-go-lucky Nigger who would be more ob a hindrance dan a halp to us.”

“Quite so.”

“But am he not de Gran’ Master ob dis Excelsior Secret Society dat he organized some time ago?”

“Sure, he’s dat. An’ he gets two dollars fer ebery new member he fotch inter dat society in a coffin. He done carry me as fer as de Portals Ob Hostibilla onct—but no funder.”

“Yo’ didn’ git ’nitiation, den?”

“No sah, not me. I turn clean inside out an’ squirm my way down from dat place. Don’ figger ter ride in no coffin till time comes I has ter.”

“Brudder Hudson,” Organizer Rodgers hitched his chair closer to Homer and laid a hand gently on the pugilist’s corded arm, “s’pose I was ter make yo’ a proposition, dis mawnin’? S’pose I was ter offer yo’ de honor ob fillin’ de highes’ office ob dis Freed Children ob Africa Society; would yo’ accep’?”

Homer’s eyes sought the other man’s suspiciously.

“Dat all de-pen’s on what de position am.”

“Suttingly. Well den, s’posin’ I was ter say it was dat ob *Royal Angel* ob de society?”

“What dat mean I’ll hab ter do?”

“Why, brudder, simply father de society, guide an’ control it, an’ be a angel ter it in all ways yo’ kin. Bear wif its faults an’ succor an’ protect it.”

“But dat’ll cos’ me money.”

“A mere trifle, brudder, a mere trifle.”

Homer scowled. “I don’t fink I wanten be no Angel sucker,” he decided.

*"Brudder," he said
pleadingly, "turn not
a deaf ear to de
voice ob Opportunity
dis day."*



Organizer Rodgers sighed patiently.

"Brudder," he said pleadingly, "turn not a deaf ear to de voice ob Opportunity dis day. Whyfer should yo' hesitate when Good Fortune whisper 'Come dis way'?"

"But," Homer's voice was fear-ridden, "dat fing yo' calls Opportunity may be only ol' Dame Bad Luck temptin' dis Nigger ter shoot craps wif loaded dice. Once bit, twice shy, dat's me. I been playin' goat fer so long, I's scared to open my mouf fer fear I'll bleat. I been a easy-mark as long as I'm gonter be. Get dat."

"Brudder Hudson," spoke Organizer Rodgers chidingly, "dere are men who would gib anyfing dey possess, almos', ter be what yo' hab been invited ter be, Royal Angel ob The Freed Children ob Africa. It's de highes' compliment an' honor de society can bestow. All de great men ob de worl' hab been Royal Angels one time er nuther. Only a great man will do. Dat's fer why I come ter yo'."

"An' dis Royal Angel, him does jes' *what*? Say it ag'in."

"Why, brudder, all he do is simply finance de order till de membership dues come in; dat's all. Pays de few preliminary expenses—sech as hall rent, printin', an' so forth."

“Humph! An’ s’posin’ I’s fool enuf ter do so much—what I get fer this angelic financin’? Dat’s what I longs ter know *now*.”

“Yo’ gits,” said Mr. Rodgers suavely, “two dollars back fer ebery one yo’ expend toward financin’ de order.”

“How so?”

“Dis hyar way, Brudder Hudson. On Chris’mas Eve de order will hol’ de gran’ beauty contes’ rally—as yo’ knows. Well, on dat night only paid-up members will be allowed ter vote in de contes’ what will say whever de belle ob Chatville East or de belle ob Bridgetown am de mos’ beautifuller.

“Yo’ knows de feelin’s runnin’ high an’ strong, brudder. Eberybody’ll want ter vote; consequence, dere’s goin’ ter be a heavy due-fall dat night, an’ previous. Us charge six dollars ’nitiation fee. Free ob dat goes ter yo’ an’ free ter me. How’s dat?”

“An’ how much money dis goin’ ter cost de Royal Angel, spot down?” Homer asked.

“Sho’! A mere trifle, brudder. Say two hundred dollars.”

“Lor’ A’mighty!” Homer fairly staggered under the force of this intelligence. “Two hundred! Dat’s a heap more’n bein’ a Royal Angel’s worf.”

“Not so, brudder,” soothed Rodgers. “Listen ter me, Gran’ Organizer ob dis order an’ one who knows whereof he speaks. What yo’ s’pose is happenin’ right now in Chatville East an’ Bridgetown? I’ll tell yo’. Dem two belles am workin’ eberbody dey knows ter vote fer dem. Ebery one what vote mus’ be a paid-up member to de order. Christmas Eve, night ob de gran’ beauty contes’, ’ll see us wif more’n a thousan’ dollars in de treasury.”

Homer’s face lightened. His gold tooth gleamed in a smile. “Ob which I gets half, yo’ say?”

“Ob which yo’, as Royal Angel, gets half, pervidin’ yo’ accep’ de sacred trus’ ob de order an’ become now an’ herewith said Royal Angel.”

“I’s perfuctly willin’, on de basis outlined,” Homer decided.

He got up from his chair and from an inner pocket drew a well-filled wallet. His fingers smoothed the soft leather caressingly. That wallet contained his share of the gate-receipts of one of the hardest battles of his career as a pugilist. He was loath to part with it.

He stood gazing undecidedly at Rodgers who was calmly buttoning his fur-lined overcoat and humming a snatch of Yuletide song.

“Jes’ a minute.”

Homer’s shoulders were hunched, his bullet head thrust aggressively forward. The muscles of his great arms rippled beneath the closely-fitting checked coat. His face was the scowling face of the fighter who had earned the championship of the county.

“Gran’ Organizer Rodgers,” he said meaningly, “one word ob warnin’ ter yo’ befo’ dis money is transferred from me ter yo’s’e’f. I’s willin’ ter be Royal Angel an’ do flyin’-stunts ter de bes’ ob my ability. I’s willin’ ter advance two hundred dollars towards financin’ expenses ob dis Chris’mas beauty contes’. But what I ain’t nowise willin’ ter do is hab yo’ try ter put anyfing ober on me. An’ so, Misto Man from Chicago, yo’ try any funny work, an’ yo’ ain’t nebber goin’ ter speak de name ob yo’r home city ag’in. Only jes de las’ syllable, mebbe. Yo’ kin ast anybudy in dis place if I’s in de habit ob lettin’ folks trifle wif me or my coin an’ get away wif it. Now I’s said my said-so, an’ we un’erstan’ each an’ oneanudder.”

Organizer Rodgers held out his hand.

“Brudder Hudson, yo’ll fin’ me fair an’ square as dat stove-pipe hole ’bove yo’r head, an’ hones’ as de sunlight ob day. Us’ll work togedder in sweet harmony toward de good ob de order ob Freed Children ob Africa. Han’ in han’ an’ shoulder ter shoulder. Me contractin’ debts an’ yo’ a-payin’—”

Homer, who was leafing banknotes from the wallet, looked up darkly.

“What’s dat agin’, ’bout yo’ contractin’ debts an’ me payin’?” he demanded.

“Nuffin’. Nuffin’ ’tall,” said Rodgers hastily. “I was jes’ a-ramblin’, dat’s all. Dis here money’ll more’n pay ’nitial ’spenses, an’ me’n yo’ll ride in on de high tide ob paid-up lodge-dues. It’s goin’ ter be a Merry Chris’mas fer yo’ an’ me, brudder. ’Tis so.”

Through a spot scratched clear of frost on the window-pane Homer watched the jaunty form of the Chicago Negro disappear through the picket gate and about a curve in the road, his fur-lined coat-tails flapping defiance to the scurrying snow, his silk hat set at a saucy angle on his crinkly pate.

Homer was experiencing the strange sensation of having lost and found something at the same time. He was minus two hundred dollars, but he was a Royal Angel. There was in that name an indefinable element which awed and mystified, and gave him a peculiar sensation of elation and distinction; something ethereal and holy that placed him apart from the common herd of humanity. Eli Rodgers, G. O., had said that only great men could be Royal Angels. Homer's chest swelled at the honor which had been paid him.

"Here's what I journeys 'cross to Len Ballister's an' crows my crow," he decided. "Won't dat long, skinny Nigger up an' paw de air when I tells him 'bout de tribute de Freed Chillun Society done pay me? I guess mebbe he will."

Homer opened the closet door to secure his overcoat when a shuffling step on the snow-packed walk without arrested his attention.

"Dat's Len now," he murmured. "Won'er what brings dat Nigger here dis day?"

"Mawnin,' Homer." Len's voice was cheerful as he shut the blustery storm behind him and knocked the snowballs from his heels on the faded linoleum beneath the stove. "Fine Chris'mas wedder, we's a-gettin'."

Homer grunted something unintelligible.

"Yo' meet up wif Gran' Chief Organizer Rodgers on de way ober?" he inquired.

Len shook his head. "Not so. Has dat gen'leman been ter see yo' dis mawnin', Homer?" he asked gently.

"Jes' dis short time lef'."

Homer sat down and pushed a chair towards his visitor. "What yo' wantin' ter see me 'bout, Len?"

"Ain't wantin'. Thought mebee yo'd be eager ter see me, Homer."

"Fer why?" There was apprehension in the tones. Something told Homer that bad luck was hovering close to ogle at him.

Len plucked a cheroot from his vest pocket and reached for a sliver.

"Kase, Homer, I done learn dat Chicago organizer man was comin' here to discuss business wif yo' dis mawnin'."

"Well, what 'bout dat?"

"I un'erstan' it was his intention to make you some sorter fifty-sixty proposition on Freed Children membership fees, pervidin' yo' financed dis beauty contes' blowout. Was I misinformationed dere?"

"Not atall. I has accepted de pos' ob Royal Angel ob de society."

"*What dat yo' is, Homer?*"

"Royal Angel. Takes a big man ter be one ob dem Royal Angels, Len. So says Misto Rodgers."

"Which means, ob cou'se, it cos' yo' some money?"

Homer squirmed. "An' what if so it did? My money, ain't it?"

"Quite so. Dat is ter say it *was* yo'r money. Ain't no mo'. Howsomeebber, what's did is did. Fing fer yo' ter do now, Homer, is let somebody in on dis proposition wif yo'. *Somebody wif brains.*"

"Don' need nobody, ner no mo' brains dan I's got my-ownse'f," Homer retorted. "If so yo's hintin' dat I let yo' in on my profits, tain't no use. I kin Royal Angel dis job alone, wifout any holp frum yo'."

"But, Homer, ain't yo' an' me allars played double—?"

"Mebbeso. But us don' no mo'."

Homer's face was scowling.

"What yo' s'pose Organizer Rodgers say ter me 'bout yo', Len?" he asked.

"Mebbe he hint dat I's a good, brainy man ter link up wif, Homer."

"Huh, I'll say he didn'. He say, 'Watch dat yaller Nigger, Ballister. He am jealous, kase de Freed Chillun Society am puttin' his 'Celsior lodge out ob business, an' he'll go ter no ends ter cause yo'—de Royal Angel ob Freed Chillun—trouble aplenty.' Dat's what he says time an' agin, ter me."

Len hitched his chair a little forward. His right eyelid twitched slightly as he turned an indignant face toward Hudson.

"Lan' sakes! He needn' been so causmatic in his remarks 'bout me, Homer. I ain't wishin' him ner his Freed Chillun Ob Africa no ha'm. None 'tall. An' as fer yo', Homer, ain't I allars been yo'r troo frien', an' stood by yo' in time ob trial?"

"I ain't sayin' yo' ain't, ain't sayin' yo' habn't." Homer returned truculently, "I's sayin' bis'ness is bis'ness. I gotter chance ter clean up big

money on candidates' fees ob dis society, an' I's settin' in alone an' happy."

"Den I reckon nuff said is nuff said."

Len got up from his seat and proceeded to wrap his red muffler about his throat.

"Only sometimes, Homer, tain't good ter spurn ol' frien's fer new," he said gently. "'Member, dis smooth gent frum Chicago may—I says *may*—leab yo' cold. Keep dat bit ob Chris'mas cheer tucked close in yo'r memorizer."

"If so he leabs me col', I'll suttingly leab him a lot *colder*," Homer said ominously. "I done warn him not ter try any funny tricks wif me, an' he ain't goin' ter."

He followed Len to the door and spoke half defiantly, half apologetically, as his friend's fingers fumbled for the latch;

"Tain't my fault yo' been sorter ignorated by de Freed Chillun Society, Len. I wanted ter hab yo' jine in de gran' Contes' Rally, but Rodgers he wouldn' hear of it nohow."

"Shucks! Homer, dat ain't nuffin," Len returned. "I didn' want ter participation no how. Wouldn' do fer county constable an' real-estate dealer ter take sides wif eider ob de two fractions dat are contestin' in dis Chris'mas Rally, don' yo' see? If so I didn' work fer de Bridgetown belle, I'd be in bad wif de Bridgetown people, same wif Chatville East. I reckon dis contes' is goin' ter stir up a heap ob strife between dese two towns. I's in a mos' peculiar position, y'see. I owes Hank Jones, de Chatville belle's father, forty dollars; an' I hopes ter sell Jim Sneeve, de man what's engaged to marry Libby Parker, de Bridgetown belle, dat garden plot in de old cemetary. So y'see it ud be mighty bad business fer me ter take a han' in de campaign."

Homer sighed his relief.

"An' yo' ain't holdin' nuffin agin Organizer Rodgers fer de hard fings he say 'bout yo', Len?"

"Lor'! No. Fer why I should, Homer? Lib an' let lib. Dat's my motter. Misto Rodgers may be a shark all right—an' mebbe so I might make it mighty oncomfor'able fer him—but I's human. No sir, I bear no man no ill will, perticular at dis Yuletide season ob de year. I's a constable, an' therefore de law. All de law asks is ter be let right severely alone. If so I was

willin' to sot in wif yo' on de cleanup, Homer, as a silent an' unknown partner—it was simply 'cause us is sech good frien's. Dat's all. Howsomeebber, yo' ain't wantin' dat, so I's satisfied."

Homer smiled. He had not expected to find Len so amenable to reason.

"Bis'ness am bis'ness, frien'ship, frien'ship," he repeated. "Len, jes' a minute. I done got sumfin' here dat I want yo' should sample, seein' it's Chris'mas season."

He led Len across the room to a low cupboard, and bending, opened the door. He brought out a squat bottle bearing a red label with three gold stars across its face, and a couple of glasses.

"Dis am mighty good liquor, Len."

"Den, I reckon it's worf tarryin' a time ober, Homer," Len proceeded to unwind his scarf.

Homer drew the cork.

"Say *when*, Len."

"Homer, dere's times when I fin' speech come bery slow. Dis am one ob dem times."

They raised their glasses.

"To our frien'ship which has stood many a trial," Lennox toasted solemnly.

"Len, I don' like dat word—*trial*."

"To good frien's an' true," Len supplemented.

"Drink deep an' hearty," Homer responded.

Early winter twilight was settling down when, the squat bottle being emptied and Homer comfortably snoring on the lounge, Lennox replenished the fire and with slightly weaving steps ploughed through the snowdrifts from Homer's cottage homeward. He had a hazy recollection of having had some sort of misunderstanding with Jane-Ann earlier in the day. Just what it was he could not recollect. But why worry over trifles?

II

t was Christmas Eve, the night of the Freed Children of Africa Beauty Contest.

I Lennox, shaving by aid of a cracked mirror and a spluttering oil lamp, paused in his task to wipe a bubble of blood that oozed up through the foamy lather from a nick in his chin. Outside the cabin the wintry gale howled and threw tiny pellets of snow against the window-panes. The lone pine close beside the door wailed in the tempest like a lost soul seeking refuge from the icy furies.

Inside, all was peace and warmth. The fragrant smell of newly-baked mince pies came from the kitchen—also Jane-Ann’s voice in song:

“No wonder my nerves all shot ter bits,” commented Len, as he wiped his blade on one of his wife’s freshly-ironed table-napkins. “War in one ear an’ Jane-Ann’s song in de udder. I’s jes’ like a cork on a whirlpool. Lor’ Harry! Why will dat wumman sing all de delorious songs in de hull worl’? Lissen to dat, now,” as from the kitchen came floating the words of the Christmas song:

“Star ob de East, Oh beautiful Star.”

“If her’s bakin’ ter dat slow time I kin see where us gets our Chris’mas dinner ’long ’bout last ob January.”

Len finished shaving, stooped to gaze through the frosted window, then with a sigh reached for his coat which hung from the back of a chair.

“Yo’, Len, whar yo’ off ter dis wil’ night?”

Len turned to confront the ponderous Jane-Ann, who, befloured arms akimbo, stood darkly surveying him from the doorway.

“ ’Mergency meetin’ ob de ’Celsior lodge, Jane-Ann. Gotter go.”

“Humph! Poker-players meetin’ in Abe White’s pool-room, more like. Yo’ don’ budge one step from dis house ter-night.”

“I gotter go, Jane-Ann,” Len told her. “Ain’t I gran’-master, Senior an’ Junior warden, Tyler an’ Secretary Treasury ob dat secret order?”

“Yo’s a hull heap ob things I don’ know yo’ is, but also yo’s a hull heap ob fings I *do* know yo’ is. An’ I sure know yo’ for de nobles’ liar in all de worl’. Take off dat coat an’ cap an’ come over here whar I kin keep an eye on yo’.”

Len fidgeted. Things certainly looked bad for him.

ane-Ann,” he said humbly, “dere’s ’nudder reason fer why I should go out. Las’ week I done see some chiney dishes in Dawson’s store winder what I

Jwant ter buy yo' for Chris'mas presen'. I didn' hab de price den. Howsomeebber," he added, "it's a stormy night an' mebbe I best bide at home here an' be comfor'able."

He proceeded to draw off his coat but Jane-Ann stopped him.

"Laws sakes, Len, can't yo' nowise take a joke? Hones' ter goodnes' yo's gettin' dat super-sensatitive a body can't tease yo' 'tall any mo'. I was only jes' a-foolin', Len. Dere ain't no reason in de worl' yo' should remain hum, see'n's it's Chris'mas Eve an' dat 'Celsior Lodge needs yo'."

Len hesitated. "Guess mebbe lodge kin git 'long wifout me," he decided.

"Yo' go 'long. Yo' know dat lodge cayn't do nuffin' ob de sort, Len Ballister."

"Sides, Jane-Ann, I fin's I's jes' free dollars short ob de price Dawson ast fer dem dishes."

"Shucks! I'll gib yo' de free dollars. Now yo' git goin' speedy."

Len took the three one dollar bills from Jane-Ann and tucked them into his vest pocket.

"'Celsior Lodge am in a bad way, Jane-Ann," he sighed, as he buttoned up his overcoat. "Dis new Freed Chillun Ob Africa Society has jes' 'bout put us outer bisness."

"Den do sumfin ter stop dat lodge, Len. Yo're smart ennuf, shorely."

"But Jane-Ann, dat gran' organizin' Chicago Nigger, is smooover dan a elum tree wif de bark off. He's done hypnotize ebery man, wumman an' chil' in dis town an' Bridgetown. An' now he puts on dis Chris'mas Beauty Contes' stunt, an' it looks like 'Celsior Lodge'll lose ebery member it's got."

"No wonder," flared Jane-Ann. "Yo'r 'Celsior Lodge am ennuf ter scare de life out ob any Nigger, luggin' him fer 'nitiation in a coffin, like I hears yo' do. Small won'er dey throw a fit when yo' tried ter enter 'em in dat lodge. I don' blame 'em. Now, take dis udder order Freed Chillun. Why, I un'erstan' dere ain't no 'nitiation 'tall in dat. Yo' jes' pays six dollars an' belongs. Dat's de kin' ob lodge fer superstitious colored folks ter jine."

"'Celsior don' use a coffin no mo'," Len offered in defense. "Us sold it ter Miss Stammers fer ten dollars day her ol' ma got blowed up blastin' rock. But de 'Celsior am a secret brudderhood wif secrets an' so it's gotter be allars, pervidin' it ain't put outer bisness by dis new order. If dese niggers ud

rather belong ter a no-'count society dan a secret one—dey kin so do. Now, I mus' git 'long ter dooty."

Trubble wif yo' is, yo' got too many irons in de fire," frowned Jane-Ann. "Yo' got too much ter fink 'bout, Len. What wif your stave-cuttin', your real-estate bisness an' bein' constable ob Chatville East, yo' ain't got de time ter gib ter dis secret lodge ob your'n. What yo' orter do is drap all dese udder fings an' concentrate on puttin' dat yaller dude ob a organizer frum Chicago out ob de runnin'. Dat smilin' nigger ain't no good. You trest a wumman's tuition to know. An' I knows whereof I speaks. I's advisin' yo' to keep an eye on Misto Eli Rodgers."

"I's keepin' one," Len said.

"Yes, yo's keepin' one, an' all de good it's doin'. Here it am Chris'mas, an' dat man's pluckin' money from our people's pockets right an' left'. Ol' Elder Hawkins can't hab de Chris'mas tree in his church dis year on 'count ob nobody bein' interested. Eberybody is Freed Chillun, an' Beauty Contes'. It almos' breaks my heart ter see Elder pinin' ober dat."

"I's not worryin' ober any pinin' Elder Hawkins am doin'," Len said unfeelingly. "I got trubbles ob my own."

"Humph! An' how 'bout de fool girls what am candidates in beauty contes'?" Jane-Ann snorted. "How 'bout dem? What's it doin' ter dem? I'll tell yo' . . . It's jes' naturally turnin' dere foolish heads. Take Sally Jones, de Bridgetown belle, an' Libby Parker, de beauty ob dis town, Len. Dey's bof ob 'em so puffed up wif vanity dey'll scarcely speak to a body. 'Sides, dey are bofe ob 'em head ober heels in lub wif dis no-'count dood, Eli Rodgers."

"Dat ain't affectin' me none," Len said. "None 'tall."

"Oh, ain't it?" Jane-Ann advanced a step and stood above her husband menacingly. "Dat beauty contes' is goin' to make a heap less joy for yo' an' me dis Chris'mas," she declared. "Yo' might as well know dat."

Len stared.

"How so, Jane-Ann?"

"Wasn' Jim Sneever goin' ter buy half ob dat garden farm frum us soon as he got married ter Libby Parker?"

"Quite so. But how's dis contes' goin to affect dat?"

"I'll tell yo' how," cried Jane-Ann, and Len quaked before the sternness in her eyes.

"Dat Libby am so stuck on dis Chicago dood her's frowed pore Jim clean oberboard."

Len gasped.

"Yo' means ter say Jim an' Libby won't be gettin' married at all, Jane-Ann?"

"Dat's exactly what I'm a-sayin'."

Len stood pondering. This intelligence if true—and apparently Jane-Ann knew whereof she spoke—was going to affect his personal interests; and anything which affected Len's personal interests was worthy of deep and painstaking consideration.

"Dat means us lose 'bout two thousan' good dollars, Jane-Ann," he groaned.

"Dat's de 'mount dat garden farm would sell fer, Len."

"Dat's what us'll lose den. Pervidin' dat marriage don' take place."

"It's not goin' ter take place, Len. How kin it? Libby Parker declar's her's too good fer Jim, an' won't hab him nohow."

Len stood thoughtfully polishing the constable's badge on his vest with his shirt sleeve. Jane-Ann went back to the kitchen. Len sank down on a stool and nursed his head in his hands.

The spindly hands on the mottled face of the old clock showed the hour to be eight-thirty. The Freed Children Beauty Contest would soon be in full swing. Finally, as though some form of action had been decided on, Len stood up. He felt in an inner pocket as if to assure himself that a certain letter was still in his possession, opened a drawer in the sideboard and from it took constable-revolver and a pair of rusty handcuffs and slipped them into his overcoat pocket, then turned toward the door.

Jane-Ann called to him from the kitchen.

"Wait up a minute, Len. I wanta take some ob dis Chris'mas cake ober ter Elder Hawkins, an' I'll company you dat fur."

"Hurry up den," Len responded. "Time is pressin' an' dis night I's a houn' ob de Law."

“Aw shucks! One wouldn’ dream it ter see how yo’ loaf ’roun’ when yo’ orter be on yo’r way ter buy dem dishes,” Jane-Ann retorted, as she appeared, drawing on her heavy coat.

They went out from the cheerful fragrant air of the house into the cold, white night.

Above the frozen river a silver star stood out in twinkling radiance; from it, a long arrow of light sped through unfathomed space to rest upon the tarnished spire of a little church.

Jane-Ann pointed it out to Len. “It’s a sign,” she whispered in awed tones. “Dat’s a message frum de Star ob Bethlehem ter dat ol’ saint Elder Hawkins.”

“Mebbe so,” said Len absently. “Yo’ step ’long, Jane-Ann. I’s goin’ in ter hab a word er so wif Tom Simmons.”

He turned in at an open gate and knocked on a door bearing in gilt letters the words: “Thomas Jeffery Simmons, Organ and Piano agent, *‘Music will drive your cares away. A dollar a week is all you pay.’*”

A thin negro with saffron-colored face and bald egg-shaped head opened the door to Len’s knock.

“Ebenin’, Misto Simmons,” Len addressed him. “Wanter talk a word er two ob bisness wif yo’, if so it’s convenient.”

“Come in,” invited the agent.

“Not necessary. Kin say all I gotter say here. Gotter git right down ter de station. I’s on constable dooty ter-night.”

Simmons pricked up his ears.

“Now den, what I want ter ast yo’ is dis,” Len resumed, “if I put froo the sale of an organ ter de ’Celsior Lodge, what do I get out of dat deal?”

Simmons stiffened to interest like a pointer to scent.

“Cash money?”

“Sure. Cash money, right in yo’r fist.”

“Yo’ gits twenty fifty. Dat’s half what I makes.”

“An’ how soon kin yo’ deliber dat organ?”

“Right away. To-night if yo’ says so.

“Den ter-night it is. Here’s free dollars down an’ de res’ right soon. How’s dat?”

“How soon?”

“Ter-morrow mawnin’.”

“Dat’s satisfactory. I’ll go get dat organ ober now.”

“T’anks, Misto Simmons, an’ a very merry Chris’mas.”

Len’s long legs propelled him down the white road toward the little red station. He paused for a moment opposite the building in which the Freed Children were holding their beauty contest to listen to the jargon of happy voices within and watch a long line of candidates, money in hand, eagerly awaiting their turn at the wicket of a small box-like stall, bearing the sign: “Pay doos here and secure voting coopons” and in which, like a king on his throne, sat grand organizer Eli Rodgers. Then, holding to the shadows. Len went on to the station.

“Sleek,” he addressed the worried looking man who acted as telegraph operator, station-agent and baggageman, “I’s goin’ ter ast yo’ a question as one ’Celsior brudder ter anudder. Also, Sleek, it’s de voice of de law speakin’ ter yo’. Tell me, did Misto Eli Rodgers buy a railway ticket from yo’ lately?”

The agent hesitated for a moment. Then, as Len flashed his constable’s badge, he answered.

“Rodgers bought a ticket fer Chicago only ’bout a hour ago, Len.”

“T’anks, Sleek. An’ what time dat express train West due here?”

“Nine-twenty. Her’ll be on time. Allars is.”

“I see. Dat’s all, Sleek. An’ now, brudder, what am yo’r obligations toward a ’Celsior brudder?”

“I keeps his secrets, fights his battles and shares his woes,” the agent responded.

They gripped hands; then Len went swiftly out and back along the snow-packed road to where the Freed Children of Africa were expectantly assembled.

He approached the brilliantly illuminated building as cautiously as a weasel approaches a chicken-pen. Without, all was quiet as the grave, but

within was music and the hoarse hum of excited voices clamouring in jargon.

Lennox slid noiselessly along the wall and peered in through a window. Every available space in the building was occupied; chairs and benches held eager and excited voters who had paid their Freed Children of Africa entrance fees in order to give the belle of their choice a “helpin’ han’.”



Between the belle of Bridgetown and the belle of Chatville East, sat Homer Hudson, Royal Angel of the Order, attired in a dress suit several sizes too small for him and holding a gilt wand in his hand.

Christmas decorations were everywhere in evidence. Paper bells of deep crimson hue and evergreens adorned the smoked ceiling. Holly winked red eyes from the cracked walls. On the platform, between the belle of Bridgetown and the belle of Chatville East, sat Homer Hudson, Royal Angel of the order, attired in a dress suit several sizes too small for him and holding a gilt wand in his hand.

There was open hostility in the glances the two belles of the rival towns threw each other. Sally Jones, gowned in a frothy creation of apple green silk, yellow silk hose and slippers of champagne color, was holding her head high like a blacksnake before it strikes, and fairly hissing

hate at her rival, Miss Libby Parker, who wore a wonderful gown of black velvet, an imitation diamond sunburst at her full throat and a “Milky Way” band of like jewels across her ochre brow.

Below the platform, Abe White’s seven piece orchestra played with spirit befitting the occasion that immortal classic: “There’ll be a hot time in the old town to-night.”

Len took in everything with one glance then softly he withdrew from the window and slipped around to the front of the building. A dim light shone from the little box office.

Len stooped and applied an eye to the key-hole in the door. He saw a lean, yellow hand transferring sheafs of banknotes from a drawer to a small black bag. Gently he tried the door. It was locked. He backed away and slipped behind the friendly shadow of a tree.

Scarcely had he gotten hidden, when the door of the box office opened noiselessly and Grand Organizer Rodgers, fur-lined overcoat buttoned well up about his throat, silk hat pulled well down over his eyes, and carrying a black bag, issued forth and like a sinister spirit started to glide across the street.

Len stepped out and confronted him.

“Howde, Misto Rodgers, also as *Soapy Foster*, what’s all yo’r hurry?”

Rodgers uttered an exclamation and his right hand flashed toward his coat pocket; but Len, his Bulldog revolver presented at the organizer’s mid-person, spoke.

“Nuffin’ like dat, now. Yo’ back up into dat place yo’ jes’ lef, an’ back speedy.”

Rodgers lost no time in obeying the order.

Once inside the tiny room, Len took the pistol from Rodgers’ pocket, reached for the black bag, put it behind him on the table, and from an inner pocket drew the letter he had received from the Chief of Chatville police. This he passed to the wilting Mr. Rodgers.

“Now den,” he said, the perusal over, “yo’ see whar yo’ stan’s wif us, de law, Misto Rodgers also as Foster. Question am, do yo’ prefer arres’ an’ injurious publicity ter—sumfin else I has ter propose to yo’?”

Rodgers shivered. “Fer Gawd’s sake don’ arres’ me, Misto Constable. I’s willin’ to do anyfing yo’ has ter propose,” he groaned.

“Lis’en den,” said Len.

For ten minutes he talked to the crestfallen Rodgers like a father would talk to an erring son. At the end of that time he sat back on his stool and surveyed the organizer from slitted eyes.

“How ’bout it?” he asked. “Is yo’ willin’ to do what I proposes, pervidin’ I keep what I knows to myse’f an’ ’low yo’ to journey away from dis place wearin’ needer bullet-hole er han’cuffs?”

“I’s willin’,” shivered the other.

“Den come ’long up ter de platfo’m an’ back me up in what I’s goin’ ter say.”

A cheer arose when Len and Grand Organizer Rodgers were seen to enter the hall together and arm in arm walk up the aisle to the platform.

Lennox, the black bag containing the night’s receipts gripped beneath an arm, held up his hand for order.

Immediately silence fell on the audience.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Len addressed them, “Gran’ Organizer Rodgers hab a mos’ important announcement ter make to yo’ all. Befo’ brudder Rodgers enunciates, I’d be favored to speak a word er two preparatory to what he may hab ter tell yo’. Ter-night de S’preme an’ Ancient order ob ’Celsior Secret Brudderhood, ob which I hab de honor to be Gran’ Master and Organizer, approached brudder Rodgers wif a proposition dat de Freed Chillun ob Africa ’malgimate wif it an’ so make fer one single Order ob impregnable strength an’ unity. Gran’ Organizer Rodgers am willin’ ter see dis ’malgimation take place, an’ in a minute er so will ast yo’ one an’ all who are paid-up members t’ Freed Chillun ob Africa, ter make de jinin’ up magnanimous. If so yo’ *do* and yo’ *will*, I’s sure, I wish ter say dat de mos’ heroic an’ nerve-shakin’ ’nitiation to ’Celsior Lodge will be dispensed wif, an’ all members ob Freed Chillun’ll be accepted as members ob ’Celsior Secret brudderhood wifout funder routine. Organizer Rodgers, who am obliged to return ter Chicago ter-night, habin’ been summoned by a telegram ob dyin’ mudder, will hab but a minute er so to gib yo’. Us’ll hear frum him now.”

“Us don’ need ter hear frum Organizer Rodgers,” cried a voice. “What yo’ an’ him ’grees on am good enuf fer us, Len.”

“Dat’s right,” shouted the audience.

Len bowed low.

“Dat bein’ de case, brudders an’ ladies, us’ll consider it settled.”

He walked over to the downcast Rodgers and held out his hand.

“Brudder, as yo’ has a train ter ketch, us’ll excuse yo’. Good-by, many fanks for yo’r good work, an’ Merry Chris’mas.”

Amid the lusty cheers of the audience, Organizer Eli Rodgers slunk from the hall.

Len rubbed his hands and smiled down on faces that smiled back at him.

“Brudder lodge members, an’ sister frien’s,” he resumed, “I has still one proposition ter make ter yo’ one an’ all. It am dis. We hab wif us ter-night two outstanding beauties from our respective towns. I refer ter Miss Sally Jones ob Bridgetown, an’ Miss Libby Parker ob Chatville East. Dis contes’ ter-night was ter decide which ob dese belles am most beautifuller. Frien’s, yo’ hab only ter look at dem bofe ter know it ud take somebudy more’n human ter decide dat. Each ob dese belles am so beautiful needer ob dem could be more so. Now den, what I proposes, is, dat each ob dem be giben a prize of one hundred dollars frum de fees ter-night collected. What say yo’ all? Please ter indicatun yo’r sentiments by eeder a clap on de han’s—er silence.”

“Jes’ a minute.”

Homer Hudson leaped to his feet, and poising his gilt wand like a javelin-thrower, glared at the speaker and then at the smiling audience.

“Right here,” Homer shouted, “befo’ dis bisness proceeds funder, I feels contrained ter ast Misto Ballister one er two pertinent questions, fust ob which am: s’pose a brudder, already a ’Celsior, done jined up wif dis Freed Chillun ob Africa an’ paid his six dollars doos. Am he entitled ter dat money back?”

All eyes turned to Len.

“Constitution num’er fo’ eighty-six ob Lodge-Code done deal wif dat question fully,” spoke up that gentleman suavely. “’Cordin’ ter dat code all ’Celsiors what jined Freed Chillun an’ paid dere doos, gets receipt in full payment ob a year’s lodge-doo in advance.”

He glanced across at Homer and shuffled his feet on the platform.

“Annudder question dat brudder Hudson is 'bout ter ast—an' which he, er any brudder, hab ebery right ter ast—am, 'If 'Celsior doos am only *five* dollars, an' Freed Chillun, six, what dispensation will be made ob dat extry dollar? Ter dat question I answer dis: dat extry dollar goes toward de buyin' ob a new organ fer our lodge room—if so yo' all am willin'.”

Cries of “We’s willin, Len,” and “Whatever yo’ says, goes,” drowned Homer Hudson’s voice of protest. He threw aside his gilt wand and climbing down from the platform elbowed his way through the jibing crowd out of doors.

The belle of Bridgetown and the belle of Chatville East were seated close together now, whispering amicably and smiling sweetly one on the other.

Len pointed toward them. “Frien’s,” he said softly, “once mo’ I asts dat if so my proposal regardin’ dese two cha’min’ an’ beautiful ladies meet with yo’r approval, clap yo’r han’s.”

Deafening applause greeted his words, Len smiled and bowed, smiled and bowed again.

“Frien’s,” he spoke when the clapping had subsided, “if so I seems ter be runnin’ dis Chris’mas Contes’ Rally, lemme say sech was furdes’ frum my t’oughts when I step up on dis platfo’m. Howsomeebber, I’ve done my li’l all; an’ now, I asts dat somebuddy be chose ter act as de Santy Claus dat pays a cash tribute ter beauty, an’ I sugges’ dat sumbuddy be Jim Sneever.”

From the black bag Len extracted the amount of the prizes, and stood waiting for Sneever, who amid sallies and cheers, elbowed his way to the platform.

Len handed him the money and bending whispered in his ear.

“Jim, if dis don’ reinstation yo’ wif Libby, it’s yo’r own fault. Yo’ll fin’ me right here, ready ter lis’en, when yo’ comes back.”

Len sat back and closed his eyes. The orchestra had struck up a Yuletide selection which sounded like a hail storm on a tin roof and the audience were singing the words. Len was supremely contented, supremely happy. This was Christmas Eve as Christmas Eve *should* be. He opened his eyes to see Sally Jones tittering coyly as she accepted her prize. He saw Jim Sneever approach Libby Parker and stand humble and dumb in the radiance of her loveliness. He saw Libby smile tenderly upon Jim, saw her bend her regal head and whisper something in his ear. Then, reaching down, Len opened the black bag on his knees, and waited.

The last verse of “Jolly Old St. Nicholas” was being sung with gusto when Sneever stole up behind Len and touched him on the shoulder.

“Len, lis’en here. Libby done say I’s ter pay yo’ dis hundred as part fust payment on dat buildin’-lot. Quick, Len, take it befo’ anybody gets wise.”

Len twisted his long body so as to place it between Sneever and the audience.

“Jes’ drap it in dat satchel, Jim. Dat’s all right. Now jine in de singin’ an prove yo’self as happy as yo’ feels.”

It was long after the lights in the Chatville East Barracks had been extinguished and the happy crowds had dispersed, that Len Ballister, Grand Master, Junior and Senior Warden, Tyler and Secretary-Treasurer of the Excelsior Secret Brotherhood, came softly from that society’s lodge room and stood for a moment on the Sacred Portals of Hostibilla, gazing with wrapt expression toward the Eastern Star, now a dim point in the wintry sky. In the solid safe in the basement reposed more than one thousand dollars in new membership fees. A brand new organ stood beside the altar of the Grand Master. Jim Sneever and Libby Parker had made up their lover’s quarrel; the sale of the garden property was an assurance. Beneath his arm he held Jane-Ann’s set of china dishes and to-morrow—no to-day—was Christmas.

Len’s heart was tender toward all mankind as he descended the creaky steps and sought the path leading homeward.

As he drew near his cabin, from whose window a light twinkled like a beacon ray, a huge something rose up from the shadows to confront him; a big negro in a dress suit and wide expanse of shirtbosom.

“Lor’ sake, Homer, what yo’ doin’ out here?”

Len braked, skidded and almost turned turtle, so suddenly had the apparition came upon him.

Homer’s voice was sullen.

“I been a-waitin’ up fer yo’. Dat’s why I’s here. I want ter know whedder I’s still a Royal Angel, Len? If I is I makes no kicks.”

“An’ if yo’ *isn’t*, Homer? What den?”

“Den I wants dat two hunderd dat Angel job cost me an’ I wants it quick off.”

Len considered.

“Homer,” he said, “ ’cordin’ ter presen’ indications ’Celsior Lodge don’t need no Royal Angel. But Homer,” as the other’s jaw squared ominously, “dat ain’t sayin’ it nebber will. So, Homer, yo’ may still consider yo’self Royal Angel wit de right to finance anyfing de lodge undertakes ter do.”

Homer sighed his relief.

“Dat’s all right den, Len. I’s satisfied,” he said.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

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[The end of *Ring Out Wild Belles*, by Archie P. McKishnie]