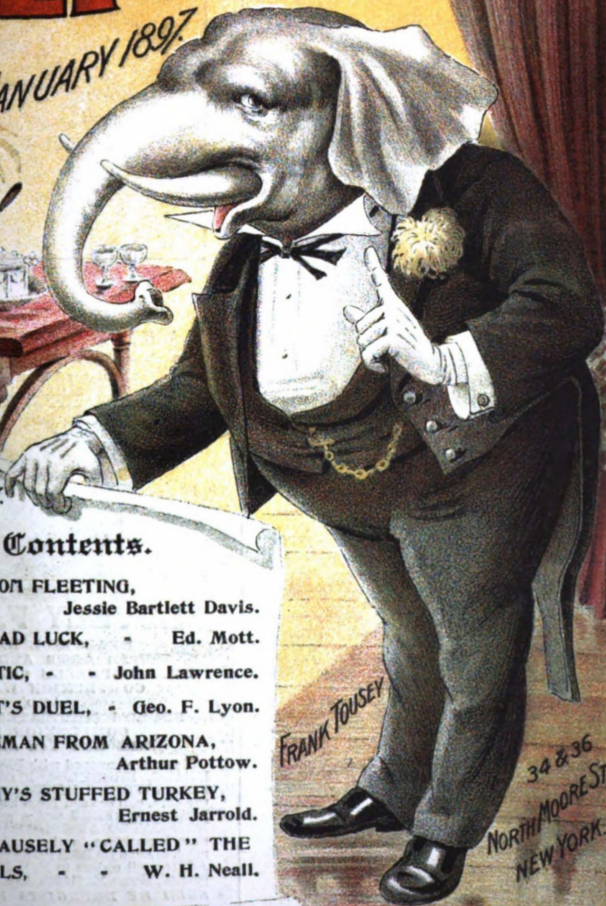


THE

# WHITE ELEPHANT

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A Happy  
New Year.

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## MARSE CHET'S DUEL.

BY GEO. F. LYON.



T the close of a long day's ride I found myself, late in the afternoon, making my way slowly along a dreary bit of country road in Southern Carolina. As far as I could see on either hand were wide-spreading fields of damp, marshy land, with here and there small clumps of low, stunted bushes. A few miles across the fields to my right the Santee rolled slowly along through cultivated fields of cotton and rice.

I urged my tired horse on, eager to find some place of shelter from the night and rapidly-approaching storm, both of which were almost upon me. I looked about, but could see nothing save the same wide-spreading fields of swamp on either hand, and a solitary bird of great size slowly winging its way overhead to the river banks beyond.

I saw no way out of it but to face the night and coming storm as best I could, and I felt self-provoked that I had not stopped over at one of the little villages through which I had passed several miles back, but too far behind to think of returning at this late hour, although I confess I was thinking seriously of doing so rather than to face the storm and the night. So deeply was I engrossed in considering whether to turn about and go back or

not that I had not noticed that my horse had left the turnpike upon which we had been traveling, and was now slowly picking his way along a narrow grass-grown path, or what seemed to once have been a road or driveway leading up from the main road to a group of trees, through the tops of which I could see a roof and several chimneys. Knowing that shelter of some kind was at hand, I pushed rapidly on, not a little pleased at the sudden change in my unpleasant prospects, although I was somewhat surprised to find such a place as this appeared to be in this out-of-the-way, deserted region. As I drew nearer I obtained a better view of the place, which was apparently deserted and fast going to decay. A number of large, overgrown trees shaded and hung low over the roof, which was green with moss and fallen leaves. The loose clapboards rattled and clattered in the wind, and a broken window shutter flapped dismally to and fro. The windows, too, were broken out in many places and gone, and the wide steps of the veranda were rotten and unsafe. The path or driveway leading down to the road was full of tall grass and stones, with nothing to mark its course save a low, scraggy hedge, overgrown and thriving in its neglect. The lawn, sloping gradually down to the road, was also thickly grown with tall, rank weeds and bushes. The whole place showed an air of neglect and ruin.

I dismounted from my horse and led him around the house to the stable in the rear, and succeeding in finding some loose hay in the loft overhead, I threw him an armful and went back around the house again and up the steps of the veranda to the front door just as the rain began to fall in great pattering drops.

I was about to open the door and go in, when I heard a step on the gravel path behind me, and turning I saw an old negro standing there at the corner of the house and regarding me with curious eyes.

As soon as he saw me turn and look at him he lifted his old battered hat, and with a feeble bow, he said in a remarkably distinct accent:

“Howdy do, sarh?”

I returned his greeting in rather an amused tone, for I could not help smiling a little at the sight of his tall, bent figure covered with an old army blue coat soiled and torn, reaching down nearly to his heels. He had on a pair of gray cotton pants with huge patches of some darker material sewed conspicuously on each knee, while his feet were thrust into a pair of old shoes which

had evidently seen their better days long ago. He appeared to be quite old, for he moved with slow, feeble steps, leaning heavily on a stout cane or staff.

The sound of his voice somewhat startled me, for I supposed the place to be entirely deserted and alone, but concealing both my surprise and amusement at the sight of his grotesque figure as best I could, I quickly returned his greeting, and said :

"Hello, Uncle. I saw that we were going to have a storm and I thought, perhaps, I might find shelter here for the night."

He looked at me a moment in surprise, and then hobbled slowly up the steps of the veranda to where I stood, and looked me carefully over from the tip of my shoes to the top of my hat, then without a word he thrust his hand down into the depths of his trousers pocket and drew forth an old iron key and slowly proceeded to unlock the door.

After some little fumbling and twisting he at length succeeded in unlocking it, and he swung it back, creaking and groaning on its rusty hinges, and motioning me to follow him, he went in. A damp, musty smell greeted us as we entered, and as he turned to close the door behind us, I glanced about the hall in which we stood. Great patches of plaster hung in masses from the wall and ceiling through which the bare laths could be seen beneath. Broken pieces of furniture were scattered about here and there. The floor creaked woefully as we walked along the hall and entered a long room opening to the left.

This apartment, too, had the same appearance of age and neglect as the hall through which we had just passed. Countless festoons of cobwebs hung gracefully from the ceiling, reaching nearly down to the floor : while the furniture of the room, once elegant and luxurious, was now broken and scattered about in confusion. The carpet at our feet was damp with mold and full of holes, and what once had been heavy, crimson curtains or draperies, hanging about the windows, were now a moth-eaten mass of hanging rags. A few old-time pictures and portraits hung tilted from the walls, but they were so thickly covered with mold and dust that it was well nigh impossible to tell now what they once had been.

I went to the window and, thrusting aside the curtains, looked out, and plainly saw that my chances of getting away that night were fast disappearing, for the rain fell in torrents and the sky looked dark and grim : evidently it had settled down for a rainy night.

I went back and drawing an old arm-chair up to the fireplace, at one end of the room, I sat down, and the old negro soon followed my example by depositing himself in another on the opposite side from me.

The dampness of the room soon began to make itself felt, and knowing the folly of spending a night in that damp, wet place, I got up and gathered a pile of the old broken chairs and tables scattered about the room, and piled some of them in the old fireplace with the intention of having a fire should I desire to go to sleep before morning. I then sat down again and proceeded to make myself as comfortable as the circumstances and surroundings would permit.

I presume my companion thought that I was taking a good deal of liberty, although he said nothing, but sat there watching me with an attention which I could not help smiling at in spite of myself. As soon as I sat down again, he produced an old corn-cob pipe, and began to fill it with some loose tobacco leaves, which he fished from some of the numerous pockets of his coat. I gave him some of my own fine-cut, for which he seemed greatly pleased, and after filling his pipe with it, he lit it, and sat puffing away in evident enjoyment and satisfaction.

For several moments we sat there in silence, and I looked about the old low raftered room, and wondered who and where the owner of all these faded surroundings was, and turning to the old man I asked :

“ Who owns this old place, Uncle ? ”

He looked at me a moment as if surprised at my question, then taking his pipe slowly from his lips, he said in a voice feeble with age, yet clear and distinct, with little or none of the broken dialect of the southern negro which I had hitherto been accustomed to hearing :

“ Don't you know this place, sarh ? ” he quickly asked, looking at me sharply.

I shook my head, and he went on :

“ I reckoned that everybody knew this place. I take it that you are a stranger in these parts, sarh. ”

“ Yes, ” I replied. “ I never was in this part of the country before until to-night. ”

He nodded his head in reply to this, and then continued.

“ Well, this old place use to belong to the old Colonel. You have heard tell of old Colonel Darrel, sarh ? ”

“ No, ” I interrupted. “ Who was the old Colonel ? ”

"The old Colonel; sarh? Why, he was my old master 'way back before the war, and he owned this place here and another down the river, but after young Marse Chet fought that duel with that young French fellow that come up from Savannah, old Marse he shut this old house up, and nobody ever came near it again, 'cause the people round these parts know all about the old house and say that it is haunted, and that every Christmas night the ghost of young Marse Darrel and that young French fellow that he fought the duel with come, and all the others that was here that night it happened."

I now began to get a little interested, and thinking perhaps it might help pass away a dreary hour for me there, I asked the old man to tell me about the old house, and why it was haunted. At first he did not seem inclined to say much about it, but after a few questions and a silver dollar, he told me the story of the old house, the old Colonel and his only son, Chester, and the duel he didn't fight.

It was many years ago that it all happened, before the war it seems, and young Chester Darrel, the only son and child of old Colonel Darrel, had just returned from college in the North, and the days that followed his return home were full of life and excitement. The young man was naturally a gay, reckless sort of a chap, and whenever he was at home or abroad, he was constantly surrounded by a company of young men as reckless and gay as himself—friends of his from the neighboring towns and cities.

The old Colonel was a stern, gruff old man, who cared neither for gait or pleasure, and he looked on with disapproval while Chester and his boon companions were carousing and riding about the country on the old man's best horses and spending his money.

The nights were generally spent in drinking, and the morning light often found them lingering over the cards, and often the guests and sometimes even their host were carried bodily one by one by the servants to their rooms, insensible with wine. For some time the old colonel looked calmly on thinking that perhaps after Chester had sowed a few of his wild oats that he might settle down and become a dutiful son, but the gay company came and went and there was ever a constant round of boisterous festivities. For over a year things at the old place went on in this way. When young Darrel was not at home carousing and riding about the country and drinking at the taverns,

he was away rioting and having a good time somewhere else with his father's money. It was all in vain that the old Colonel at first talked and reasoned with his son, it was also all in vain when his good old mother pleaded and wept for him to reform, become a dutiful son, and equally in vain was it when the old Colonel, unable to any longer sustain himself, raved and swore that there should be a stop put to these scandalous proceedings at once, but Chester only listened patiently while his father talked, and when he was gone he laughed over it and things still went on in the same old way as before.

At length seeing that all talk and reason or pleadings were without any effect upon their wayward son, the old Colonel and his good old wife finally decided that they would go away—leave the old place to Chester and his associates, and perhaps sometime after they were gone, he would miss father and mother and reform. So one day the old family servant drove them in the family carriage down the river to the other place that was owned by the Colonel, leaving the mother's old home to the son and his wild companions, "monarchs of all they surveyed."

After the old Colonel left the place the servants soon began to be more in fear of the young master than they were of the old one, and instead of having the desired effect that the old folks had hoped for, things grew rapidly from bad to worse, and the whole neighborhood for miles stood aghast at the stories whispered about the doings at the old place. Night after night was spent in gambling and drinking and the days in carousing about the country for miles, until it seemed as if the occupants of the old house never slept, as it was a continuous round of riotous dissipation night and day.

It was Christmas night; the old folks had been gone over a month now, and there came up from Savannah a gay company of young sports to spend Christmas cheer with the young master. Among them was a young French fellow, Claud Gaston—a gay, reckless sort of a young chap, fond of cards and wine. All Christmas day was passed in riding about the country, and drinking at the taverns and having a good time, and after nightfall the gay company gathered in the long dining-room, and wine and cards being produced, the festivities began.

Chester Darrel and the young French fellow from Savannah were seated at a table playing faro together. Darrel was a good player, but young Gaston was a better one, and soon his superior skill in handling the cards began to tell against his companion's

more careless playing. Gaston, calm and collected, played, while Darrel seemed flushed and excited; his hand was unsteady from the effects of the wine he had been drinking, and his eyes gleamed with feverish excitement as he raised the bet already on between them to his last dollar.

He lost! It was only a natural ending against as adept a player as his guest was; but not believing in his own inferiority, Darrel cursed his luck, and draining another glass of wine, insisted upon another game, with Gaston to name the stakes. Darrel was without a dollar to put up, and he would not borrow. Already his watch, horse and jewels were gone, and still he must play again. What could he offer to make a bluff of it anyway and win back all that he lost?

Suddenly Gaston leaned over the table and whispered a few words in the ear of his host.

"You are engaged," he hissed, "so they tell me, to Miss Olive Arnold. Is it true?"

Young Darrel started a trifle at this, and then bowed his head in reply.

"Well," continued the tempter, "to make the game an object I will put up all I have won from you and five hundred dollars in addition if you will put up your claim to the hand of Miss Olive. If I win you are to yield up all claim whatever you may have upon her. If you win, all you have lost is yours, with five hundred dollars beside. As an object to play for and to make it interesting I do this. You can do as you please, however. Will you do it?"

For a moment young Darrel's cheeks flushed with anger and offense, but the fever and passion for play was upon him, and bowing his head, he muttered:

"I agree. Go ahead."

Gaston chose the jack of clubs, while Darrel staked his all on the queen of hearts, and watched with feverish intensity each turn of the cards. The jack won, with the queen following the next turn, almost a winner for young Darrel.

"It was not a fair deal!" he cried in his disappointment and despair. "You cheated, and I know it!"

"It was a straight game from the first," Gaston insisted, and he smiled exultantly into the face of his host.

"You lie!" was all Darrel could gasp in his rage, but scarcely had he uttered the words when Gaston seized his half-filled glass and dashed its contents full in the face of his host.



Some of the cooler headed ones among them sprang forward between them. For a moment they stood glaring at each other, their eyes flashing and cheeks aflame with rage. Both naturally hot-headed and fired with drink, they both insisted upon having immediate satisfaction given, and, of course, that meant a duel, and a duel Christmas night seemed to the gay assembly a fitting entertainment and a grand idea, and as they both insisted upon it, it was decided that a duel must be fought between the guest and his host that both might have the satisfaction demanded. A duel Christmas night, when peace and good will should reign among all men, seemed to the half-drunken company the very thing they needed to complete the day's festivities.

They were to have satisfaction in the good, old-fashion way of their fathers, but as anger was hot and liable to cool when the fumes of wine left their muddled brain, it was decided that the duel must take place at once, without delay, before the passion of either might have a chance to cool. The choice of weapons, of course, according to the old code belonged to young Gaston, and without a moment's consideration he chose pistols; then somebody, as a half-drunken joke, suggested that they fight in the dark, each man having *one* shot and equally as good a chance as the other in the darkness. The idea was a good one, and it was acted upon, and the long dining-room was chosen; the window shutters were closed and securely fastened, and the young men, each having braced himself for the ordeal with a stiff drink of brandy, took their places, one at each end of the long room, and the door was closed and locked upon them. The signal agreed upon for the young men to begin the hunt for the other was the popping of a champagne cork, in the hall outside, by the other guests. The bottle was opened, and with a loud pop the cork flew to the ceiling, and while the guests were drinking, just outside, the men inside were straining every nerve and sense of hearing to locate his opponent. For several moments all was still within the dining-room, then the stealthy steps of one of them could be heard creeping softly about, then came the fall of a chair as one of them had stumbled against it with uncertain, staggering step, and then there came the sound of a hurried rush of feet, and a loud report told the eager listeners that one of the men had taken his chance, but had he failed or won they knew not, nor could they tell which it was, guest or host. The wine was left forgotten now by the listeners, as they

gathered about the door listening with straining ears for the second report which they expected every moment to hear, but all was silent inside now, not a sound could be heard but their own suppressed breathings, and the beat of the storm on the windows and the night wind outside. Each moment seemed an hour to the now almost sober listeners. Ten minutes passed, and as the silence at last inside became almost unbearable, one of them called through the keyhole :

“Go on; what are you waiting for?”

There was no answer, and after a moment's impatience at the delay, some one suggested that a light be produced, and that they go in and see what the strange silence could mean. Again some one shouted through the keyhole, but there came no answer or sound from within, and then a light being produced they unlocked the door, and holding the lamp high over their heads, they slowly and cautiously entered, as if fearful of they knew not what. A death-like stillness prevailed; the guests peered nervously and anxiously about the room—up and down, and there among the shadows at the end of the long dining-room table, outstretched on the floor in a pool of blood, with a bullet hole in his side, lay the form of Claud Gaston, the young French fellow from Savannah, with a smile on his handsome young face, and grasped tightly in his hand was his pistol still undischarged, but he was alone. Expecting each moment to see the form of young Darrel, huddled behind some article of furniture, or crouched in some dark corner, the guests began to look about, but in vain; their host had disappeared completely. The guests, now horrified and sober with alarm, stood looking at each other in wonder and fear. Where was Chester Darrel? The windows of the dining-room had all been securely closed and fastened, and the door, the only means of entrance or exit to the room, was also locked on the outside, and the closest search failed to reveal anything whatever like a trap-door or secret passage anywhere, but it was only too plain that the shot fired was by young Darrel, and it had slain his guest, and now where was he? He could not have passed out when the door was open when the guests entered the room. That was impossible, as a number of them stood in the doorway at that time, and all were positive that he had not passed them. The body of the young French fellow was carried up-stairs by the servants, and together the guests made a systematic search of the whole house from attic to cellar, and all through the grounds, but it was all

in vain, nothing was found, not even the slightest clew of the missing man. The shutters of the dining-room were found undisturbed, and not even a footprint on the soft gravel outside the windows could be found. Chester Darrel had as completely disappeared as if the earth had opened and swallowed him; mysteriously disappeared in a most mysterious manner.

The next day all the servants, assisted by the guests, began a most thorough search of the house and grounds once more, and finding nothing they scoured the surrounding country for miles around, but in vain, and they all returned, and the next day following the guests all scattered and left the old place alone and in the hands of the servants.

The old Colonel never cared to return to the old home again, and in the spring his wife passed away, and the old man, alone now, and broken-hearted at the strange, untimely end of his son, lived but a short time after the death of his wife, and then the war broke out soon after and one by one the slaves stole away and the old place was left deserted and alone. Stories were told about the surrounding country that the old place was haunted—haunted by the ghost of Chester Darrel, and the young French fellow from Savannah. Every Christmas night, it was said, they came at midnight and fought over again the duel in the long dining-room, and the people about seemed to grow to believe the stories, and the old house was left more to itself than ever.

Here, the old man finished his story, and still shaking his old gray head sat smoking away in silence. I looked at my watch, and was surprised to find that it was after midnight, and thinking that perhaps I might catch a few hours' sleep before morning, I got up and lit the pile of old broken furniture I had piled upon the hearth. A bright, cheerful blaze leaped up the huge mouth of the old chimney, and filled the old low raftered room with smoke, which poured out in clouds, nearly suffocating my companion and myself. The fault seemed with the chimney, which would not draw, thus causing the smoke to issue forth out into the room, and thinking something must be obstructing the draught, I took the cane or staff, which the old negro had used in walking, and I thrust it vigorously up the flue. It was as I had expected—there was something up there, and shutting my mouth and eyes to keep out the smoke as best I could, I reached up the whole length of my arm and gave another thrust, and I heard something drop and come clattering down the chimney and fall upon the hearth and roll out across the floor straight

toward the old negro, who sat dozing in his old arm chair. He opened his eyes slowly and gave one look at the object, and with a wild yell of terror, leaped to his feet and stood there regarding the object with chattering teeth and horrified gaze. As soon as I got some of the soot and smoke out of my nose and eyes, I looked more closely myself at the thing, and I saw there before me on the floor, a round shining, grinning skull, with its eyeless sockets fixed steadily upon the old negro, who in his fear and sudden shock, stood weak and trembling. Thinking perhaps I might find something more up the old chimney, I again reached up and poked about; this time I succeeded in dislodging a mass of bones which came rattling down onto the hearth, and nearly putting out my fire. To the bones a mass of rotten rags still hung to which were attached several buttons of a peculiar pattern, which the old negro regarded for a moment in horror and surprise, then as the truth began to dawn upon his feeble old mind, he exclaimed, huskily :

“Marse Chet, sure as I’m-alive!”

And indeed it was true; evidently horror-stricken at the result of his shot in the darkness and hearing his foe fall, or perhaps fear-stricken after firing his one shot and fearing his opponent would take his life, he had climbed up the wide mouth of the old chimney, and had become fast up there upon the stout iron hooks inside, which were used in cleaning out the chimney. Of course the noise and confusion which reigned upon his strange disappearance, would completely drown his cries and calls for help; even the thick brick walls of the chimney would have completely muffled any sounds he could have made for assistance, and so, fast upon those cruel hooks, Chester Darrel must have suffered a terrible, miserable death, and after the old house was deserted his body had never been found until I had rudely dislodged it from its last resting place. I gathered up the remains as best I could, and with the help of the old negro, buried what was left of his young master out in the garden in the pouring rain, in plain sight from the window of the dining room where he had fired the shot that Christmas night which had slain his guest.

When we had completed our grewsome task I went back into the old room again and sat there smoking, the old negro and I, and I fell asleep. When I awoke the storm was over; it had stopped raining and the pale southern moon was stealing out from behind a dark bank of clouds, throwing a bright ray of golden light across the floor and up the side of the old fireplace.

In the morning I mounted my horse to resume my journey, and just before I rode away I gave the old man a handful of loose silver I had in my pocket and my bag of fine cut, and then I rode away. When I reached the turn in the road I looked back at the old house and saw the old negro sitting there sunning himself on the steps of the old veranda.