



CHAPTER 12

WHERE NOW IS BILLY RICE? HE WAS A JOY TO ME AND SO WERE THE others in the **minstrel** show who made life a pleasure to me forty years ago and later. They are all, I suppose, departed to return no more forever, and with them the real Negro minstrel show, the show which had no equal. We have grand opera and I have seen and greatly enjoyed the first act of everything Wagner created, but the effect on me has always been so powerful that one act was quite sufficient; after two acts I have gone away physically exhausted.

I remember the first minstrel show I ever saw. It must have been in the early 1840s. It was a new institution. In our village of Hannibal we had not heard of it before and it came upon us as a glad and wonderful surprise.

The show remained a week and gave a performance every night. Church members did not attend these performances, but all the other people did—and they loved them.

The original plan of the minstrel show was kept without change for many years. There was no curtain on the stage in the beginning; presently the minstrels came in and took their seats, each with a musical instrument in his hands. In the middle of the group was a very elegantly dressed man, who began with a remark like this:

“I hope, gentlemen, I have the pleasure of seeing you in your usual good health and that everything has gone well with you since we last had the good fortune to meet.”

From this point on there would be a steadily growing quarrel between the two on each side of the elegant gentleman, getting louder and louder and finally threatening bloodshed, with the man in the middle meantime begging them to keep the peace and observe good manners, but all in vain, of course. Sometimes the quarrel would last five minutes, the two contestants shouting deadly threats in each other's faces with their noses not six inches apart. Then finally they would back away from each other, each making threats as to what was going to happen to the other the next time they met. Then they would sink back into their chairs and make noises back and forth at each other.

The man in the middle of the row would now make a remark which was intended to remind one of the end men of an experience of his—which it always did. It was usually an experience of a tired sort and as old as America.

The minstrel show was born in the early forties and it had a successful career for about thirty-five years. To my mind it was a thoroughly delightful thing and a most laughter-making one and I am sorry it is gone.

As I have said, it was the non-church people who attended that first minstrel show in Hannibal. Ten or twelve years later the minstrel show was as common in America as the Fourth of July but my mother had never seen one. She was about sixty years old by this time and she came down to St. Louis with a dear and lovely lady of her own age, an old citizen of Hannibal, Aunt Betsey Smith. She wasn't anybody's aunt in particular, she was aunt to the whole town of Hannibal; this was because of her sweet and loving nature.

Like my mother, Aunt Betsey Smith had never seen a minstrel show. She and my mother were very much alive; their age counted for nothing; they were fond of excitement, fond of anything going on that was proper for a member of the church to enjoy. In St. Louis they were eager for something new to see and they asked me for help. They want-

ed something exciting and proper. I told them I knew of nothing in their line except a meeting in the great hall of the Mercantile Library for an exhibition of native African music. They were charmed with the idea and eager to go. I was not telling them the truth and I knew it at the time, but it was no great matter; it is not worthwhile to try to tell the truth to people who might not believe you even if it is the truth.

The show was the Christy minstrels, in that day one of the most famous and also one of the best. We went early and got seats in the front. By and by, when all the seats on that spacious floor were occupied, there were sixteen hundred persons present. When the Negroes came out on the stage in their extreme costumes, the old ladies were almost speechless. I explained to them that they always dressed like that in Africa. I said that by looking around they could see that the best people in St. Louis were present and that certainly they would not be if the show were not a proper sort.

They were comforted and also quite shamelessly glad to be there. They were happy now; all that they had needed was a pretense of some kind or other to quiet their consciences, and their consciences were quiet now, quiet enough to be dead. The middleman began. Presently he told the first of the old jokes that everybody in the house except my mother and Aunt Betsey had heard a hundred times; a cold silence settled down upon the sixteen hundred. But my two old ladies threw their heads back and went off into wholehearted laughter that so astonished and delighted that great audience that it rose in a solid body to look and see who it might be that had not heard that joke before. The laughter of the two ladies went on and on until the whole sixteen hundred joined in and shook the place with the thunders of their joy.

Aunt Betsey and my mother achieved a brilliant success for the Christy minstrels that night, for all the jokes were as new to them as they were old to the rest of the house. They received them with laughter and they passed the fun along, and the audience left the place weary with laughing and full of thankfulness to the innocent pair who had furnished to their tired souls that rare and precious pleasure.