



## A New Character for the King

WE TRAVELED ALL THE NEXT DAY AND STOPPED FOR THE NIGHT IN A section of the river where there was a town on either shore. The duke and the king again began to plan how they would trick the people in those towns. Jim said that he hoped that they would not stay away from the raft a long time because he was tired of having to be tied up with ropes and kept in the tent on the raft all day. He was frightened every time that he heard anyone come near the raft. We kept Jim tied so that it would appear that we had caught him as a runaway slave and were holding him prisoner until we could return him to his owner.

The duke and the king were afraid to repeat the show that they had performed the last three nights, for they feared that men in this town may have heard about the trick that they had played. The duke said that he would stay on the raft and think about a new plan, while the king and I went to one of the towns to see what the people were like. The king had bought himself a new suit of black clothes, which he was wearing. I never knew that clothes could change a person so completely. In his old clothes, he looked like the meanest man who

ever lived, while his new clothes made him look like a grand and good and holy person.

The king and I stepped into the canoe. We had seen a large passenger boat about three miles up the river, and the king decided to row to the boat and buy a ticket and ride back down to the town where we had left the raft. The king thought that he could make the people in the town believe that we come from a large city like St. Louis or Cincinnati.

I was very excited at the thought of getting a ride on a large passenger boat and began to row quickly up the river toward the boat. We had not gone very far when we noticed a boy walking along the river's edge, carrying some heavy bags.

"Where are you going?" asked the king.

"I'm going to ride on the passenger boat to New Orleans."

"Get into our canoe and we'll row you to the boat. My **servant** will help you with your bags. Help this gentleman, Adolphus."

I knew that he meant me, so I jumped out of the canoe and helped the boy. Then the three of us continued rowing up the river.

"When I first saw you, I thought that you must be Mr. Wilks and that you had arrived just a bit too late, but then I thought again and realized that you would not be rowing *up* the river if you were Mr. Wilks, so you must be someone else."

The king answered, "No, I'm not Mr. Wilks. My name is Blodgett —Alexander Blodgett. I'm sorry that this Mr. Wilks did not arrive in time, and I hope that he didn't miss anything important."

"He didn't miss getting property. He'll still get that. But he missed seeing his brother Peter alive. Peter would have given anything to have seen his brother before he died. He talked of little else the last three weeks of his life. The two brothers had not seen each other since they were children. And there was a third brother, William, whom Peter had never seen at all. William was much younger—he would be only thirty or thirty-five years old—and he couldn't hear or speak. Only the two brothers—Harvey and William—are left of the family, and they live in England."

"Did anyone write to them to tell them that Peter was ill?"

“Oh yes. Peter himself wrote a few months ago—when he first became ill. He was quite old and had the feeling that he would never be well again. He had one brother, George, who had lived here in America with him, but George and his wife died last year. They had three daughters, who continued to live with Peter and he wanted to be sure that they got all his property after his death. That was all that the girls would have to live on.”

“I’m sorry Peter didn’t live to see his brothers. What are his nieces’ names and how old are they?”

“Mary Jane is nineteen, Susan is fifteen, and Joanne is fourteen. Joanne is very sweet and is always doing good works, but she’s not all that pretty.”

The king looked very sad. “I’m sorry that the girls are left all alone in the cold, cold world.”

“They’re not alone. Peter Wilks had many friends, and these friends will see that the girls get the property Peter has left for them. There’s Hobson, Lot Hovey, Ben Rucker, Abner Shackleford, Levi Bell, the lawyer, and Dr. Robinson. The wives of all these men are also his friends and so is the Widow Bartley. Those are the people that Peter wrote to his brother Harvey about. When Harvey arrives, he’ll know who to turn to for help.”

The king continued asking the boy questions until he knew about everything and everyone in that town—all about the Wilkses, about Peter’s business (he was a **tanner**), and about his brothers’ businesses. Finally, he asked, “Was Peter Wilks wealthy?”

“Oh, yes, quite wealthy. He had houses and land and left nearly 4,000 dollars hidden somewhere.”

“When did he die?”

“Last night. His funeral will be tomorrow at about noon.”

When we reached the boat, the king never said a word about our going on it for a ride. I was disappointed because I had wanted very much to travel on a passenger boat. The boy left us and went on the passenger boat alone.

As soon as the boy was gone, the king told me to go another mile

further up the river; then he got out of the canoe and went on shore. He told me that he would wait there, but that I was to take the canoe and go quickly to get the duke and return with him. He said that I should row as fast as I possibly could.

I knew what his plan was but never said a word. I returned with the duke as quickly as I could, then hid the canoe. The king told the duke the complete story of Peter Wilks and was already trying to speak like an Englishman. He then asked the duke if he could act as though he were a man who couldn't hear or speak, and the duke said that he thought that he could manage that very well.

Late in the afternoon, another large passenger boat came down the river, and we waved our arms until the boat stopped. We then traveled the four or five miles to the town where Peter Wilks had lived. Many men from the town were waiting to greet passengers getting off the boat. The king asked if anyone could direct him to the house of Mr. Peter Wilks.

One man spoke softly and gently. "I'm sorry, sir, the best that I can do is to tell you where he *had* lived until yesterday."

The king fell against the man, put his head on the man's shoulder, and cried like a baby. "Oh, my poor brother—gone—dead. And we never got to see him. This is too hard to bear."

Then he turned to the duke and began making signs with his hands as though he were telling him something. The next instant the duke burst into tears, also. Well, I could see they were starting a new plan to fool these people like they had done to the others.

The men of the town felt so sorry for these two that they held them as they cried, then told the king about his brother's last hours of life. The king made signs with his hands as though he were then telling all that he heard to his brother. Then they both began to cry even harder than before. The sight of these two made me feel sick. It was enough to make a person feel shame for the human race.