



***FRANCIS  
HOPKINSON  
SMITH***

***A GENTLEMAN  
VAGABOND  
AND SOME  
OTHERS***

**Francis Hopkinson Smith**

# **A Gentleman Vagabond and Some Others**

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Contact: [DigiCat@okpublishing.info](mailto:DigiCat@okpublishing.info)



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I found the major standing in front of Delmonico's, interviewing a large, bare-headed personage in brown cloth spotted with brass buttons. The major was in search of his very particular friend, Mr. John Hardy of Madison Square, and the personage in brown and brass was rather languidly indicating, by a limp and indecisive forefinger, a route through a section of the city which, correctly followed, would have landed the major in the East River.

I knew him by the peculiar slant of his slouch hat, the rosy glow of his face, and the way in which his trousers clung to the curves of his well-developed legs, and ended in a sprawl that half covered his shoes. I recognized, too, a carpet-bag, a ninety-nine-cent affair, an "occasion," with galvanized iron clasps and paper-leather sides,—the kind opened with your thumb.

The major—or, to be more definite, Major Tom Slocomb of Pocomoke—was from one of the lower counties of the Chesapeake. He was supposed to own, as a gift from his dead wife, all that remained unmortgaged of a vast colonial estate on Crab Island in the bay, consisting of several thousand acres of land and water,—mostly water,—a manor house, once painted white, and a number of outbuildings in various stages of dilapidation and decay.

In his early penniless life he had migrated from his more northern native State, settled in the county, and, shortly after his arrival, had married the relict of the late lamented Major John Talbot of Pocomoke. This had been greatly to the

surprise of many eminent Pocomokians, who boasted of the purity and antiquity of the Talbot blood, and who could not look on in silence, and see it degraded and diluted by an alliance with a "harf strainer or worse." As one possible Talbot heir put it, "a picayune, low-down corncracker, suh, without blood or breedin'."

The objections were well taken. So far as the ancestry of the Slocomb family was concerned, it was a trifle indefinite. It really could not be traced back farther than the day of the major's arrival at Pocomoke, notwithstanding the major's several claims that his ancestors came over in the Mayflower, that his grandfather fought with General Washington, and that his own early life had been spent on the James River. These statements, to thoughtful Pocomokians, seemed so conflicting and improbable, that his neighbors and acquaintances ascribed them either to that total disregard for salient facts which characterized the major's speech, or to the vagaries of that rich and vivid imagination which had made his conquest of the widow so easy and complete.

Gradually, however, through the influence of his wife, and because of his own unruffled good-humor, the antipathy had worn away. As years sped on, no one, except the proudest and loftiest Pocomokian, would have cared to trace the Slocomb blood farther back than its graft upon the Talbot tree. Neither would the major. In fact, the brief honeymoon of five years left so profound an impression upon his after life, that, to use his own words, his birth and marriage had occurred at the identical moment,—he had never lived until then.

There was no question in the minds of his neighbors as to whether the major maintained his new social position on Crab Island with more than ordinary liberality. Like all new vigorous grafts on an old stock, he not only blossomed out with extraordinary richness, but sucked the sap of the primeval family tree quite dry in the process. In fact, it was universally admitted that could the constant drain of his hospitality have been brought clearly to the attention of the original proprietor of the estate, its draft-power would have raised that distinguished military gentleman out of his grave. "My dear friends," Major Slocomb would say, when, after his wife's death, some new extravagance was commented upon, "I felt I owed the additional slight expenditure to the memory of that queen among women, suh—Major Talbot's widow."

He had espoused, too, with all the ardor of the new settler, the several articles of political faith of his neighbors,—loyalty to the State, belief in the justice and humanity of slavery and the omnipotent rights of man,—white, of course,—and he had, strange to say, fallen into the peculiar pronunciation of his Southern friends, dropping his final *g*'s, and slurring his *r*'s, thus acquiring that soft cadence of speech which makes their dialect so delicious.

As to his title of "Major," no one in or out of the county could tell where it originated. He had belonged to no company of militia, neither had he won his laurels on either side during the war; nor yet had the shifting politics of his State ever honored him with a staff appointment of like grade. When pressed, he would tell you confidentially that he had really inherited the title from his wife, whose first

husband, as was well known, had earned and borne that military distinction; adding tenderly, that she had been so long accustomed to the honor that he had continued it after her death simply out of respect to her memory.

But the major was still interviewing Delmonico's flunky, oblivious of everything but the purpose in view, when I touched his shoulder, and extended my hand.

"God bless me! Not you? Well, by gravy! Here, now, colonel, you can tell me where Jack Hardy lives. I've been for half an hour walkin' round this garden lookin' for him. I lost the letter with the number in it, so I came over here to Delmonico's—Jack dines here often, I know, 'cause he told me so. I was at his quarters once myself, but 't was in the night. I am completely bamboozled. Left home yesterday—brought up a couple of thoroughbred dogs that the owner wouldn't trust with anybody but me, and then, too, I wanted to see Jack."

I am not a colonel, of course, but promotions are easy with the major.

"Certainly; Jack lives right opposite. Give me your bag."

He refused, and rattled on, upbraiding me for not coming down to Crab Island last spring with the "boys" when the ducks were flying, punctuating his remarks here and there with his delight at seeing me looking so well, his joy at being near enough to Jack to shake the dear fellow by the hand, and the inexpressible ecstasy of being once more in New York, the centre of fashion and wealth, "with mo' comfo't to the square inch than any other spot on this terrestrial ball."

The "boys" referred to were members of a certain "Ducking Club" situated within rifle-shot of the major's

house on the island, of which club Jack Hardy was president. They all delighted in the major's society, really loving him for many qualities known only to his intimates.

Hardy, I knew, was not at home. This, however, never prevented his colored servant, Jefferson, from being always ready at a moment's notice to welcome the unexpected friend. In another instant I had rung Hardy's bell,—third on right,—and Jefferson, in faultless evening attire, was carrying the major's "carpet-bag" to the suite of apartments on the third floor front.

Jefferson needs a word of comment. Although born and bred a slave, he is the product of a newer and higher civilization. There is hardly a trace of the old South left in him,—hardly a mark of the pit of slavery from which he was digged. His speech is as faultless as his dress. He is clean, close-shaven, immaculate, well-groomed, silent,—reminding me always of a mahogany-colored Greek professor, even to his eye-glasses. He keeps his rooms in admirable order, and his household accounts with absolute accuracy; never spilled a drop of claret, mixed a warm cocktail, or served a cold plate in his life; is devoted to Hardy, and so punctiliously polite to his master's friends and guests that it is a pleasure to have him serve you.

Strange to say, this punctilious politeness had never extended to the major, and since an occurrence connected with this very bag, to be related shortly, it had ceased altogether. Whether it was that Jefferson had always seen through the peculiar varnish that made bright the major's veneer, or whether in an unguarded moment, on a previous visit, the major gave way to some such outburst as he would



have inflicted upon the domestics of his own establishment, forgetting for the time the superior position to which Jefferson's breeding and education entitled him, I cannot say, but certain it is that while to all outward appearances Jefferson served the major with every indication of attention and humility, I could see under it all a quiet reserve which marked the line of unqualified disapproval. This was evident even in the way he carried the major's bag,—holding it out by the straps, not as became the handling of a receptacle containing a gentleman's wardrobe, but by the neck, so to speak,—as a dog to be dropped in the gutter.

It was this bag, or rather its contents, or to be more exact its lack of contents, that dulled the fine edge of Jefferson's politeness. He unpacked it, of course, with the same perfunctory care that he would have bestowed on the contents of a Bond Street Gladstone, indulging in a prolonged chuckle when he found no trace of a most important part of a gentleman's wardrobe,—none of any pattern. It was, therefore, with a certain grim humor that, when he showed the major to his room the night of his arrival, he led gradually up to a question which the unpacking a few hours before had rendered inevitable.

"Mr. Hardy's orders are that I should inform every gentleman when he retires that there's plenty of whiskey and cigars on the sideboard, and that"—here Jefferson glanced at the bag—"and that if any gentleman came unprepared there was a night shirt and a pair of pajams in the closet."

"I never wore one of 'em in my life, Jefferson; but you can put the whiskey and the cigars on the chair by my bed, in

case I wake in the night."

When Jefferson, in answer to my inquiries as to how the major had passed the night, related this incident to me the following morning, I could detect, under all his deference and respect toward his master's guest, a certain manner and air plainly implying that, so far as the major and himself were concerned, every other but the most diplomatic of relations had been suspended.

The major, by this time, was in full possession of my friend's home. The only change in his dress was in the appearance of his shoes, polished by Jefferson to a point verging on patent leather, and the adoption of a black alpaca coat, which, although it wrinkled at the seams with a certain home-made air, still fitted his fat shoulders very well. To this were added a fresh shirt and collar, a white tie, nankeen vest, and the same tight-fitting, splay-footed trousers, enriched by a crease of Jefferson's own making.

As he lay sprawled out on Hardy's divan, with his round, rosy, clean-shaven face, good-humored mouth, and white teeth, the whole enlivened by a pair of twinkling eyes, you forgot for the moment that he was not really the sole owner of the establishment. Further intercourse thoroughly convinced you of a similar lapse of memory on the major's part.

"My dear colonel, let me welcome you to my New York home!" he exclaimed, without rising from the divan. "Draw up a chair; have a mouthful of mocha? Jefferson makes it delicious. Or shall I call him to broil another po'ter-house steak? No? Then let me ring for some cigars," and he touched the bell.

To lie on a divan, reach out one arm, and, with the expenditure of less energy than would open a match-box, to press a button summoning an attendant with all the unlimited comforts of life,—juleps, cigars, coffee, cocktails, morning papers, fans, matches out of arm's reach, everything that soul could covet and heart long for; to see all these several commodities and luxuries develop, take shape, and materialize while he lay flat on his back,—this to the major was civilization.

"But, colonel, befo' you sit down, fling yo' eye over that garden in the square. Nature in her springtime, suh!"

I agreed with the major, and was about to take in the view over the treetops, when he tucked another cushion under his head, elongated his left leg until it reached the window-sill, thus completely monopolizing it,—and continued without drawing a breath:—

"And I am so comfo'table here. I had a po'ter-house steak this mornin'—you're sure you won't have one?" I shook my head. "A po'ter-house steak, suh, that'll haunt my memory for days. We, of co'se, have at home every variety of fish, plenty of soft-shell crabs, and 'casionally a canvasback, when Hardy or some of my friends are lucky enough to hit one, but no meat that is wo'th the cookin'. By the bye, I've come to take Jack home with me; the early strawberries are in their prime, now. You will join us, of course?"

Before I could reply, Jefferson entered the room, laid a tray of cigars and cigarettes with a small silver alcohol lamp at my elbow, and, with a certain inquiring and, I thought, slightly surprised glance at the major's sprawling attitude, noiselessly withdrew. The major must have caught the

expression on Jefferson's face, for he dropped his telescope leg, and straightened up his back, with the sudden awkward movement of a similarly placed lounge surprised by a lady in a hotel parlor. The episode seemed to knock the enthusiasm out of him, for after a moment he exclaimed in rather a subdued tone:—

"Rather remarkable nigger, this servant of Jack's. I s'pose it is the influence of yo' New York ways, but I am not accustomed to his kind."

I began to defend Jefferson, but he raised both hands in protest.

"Yes, I know—education and thirty dollars a month. All very fine, but give me the old house-servants of the South—the old Anthonys, and Keziahs, and Rachels. They never went about rigged up like a stick of black sealing-wax in a suit of black co't-plaster. They were easy-goin' and comfortable. Yo' interest was their interest; they bore yo' name, looked after yo' children, and could look after yo' house, too. Now see this nigger of Jack's; he's better dressed than I am, tips round as solemn on his toes as a marsh-crane, and yet I'll bet a dollar he's as slick and cold-hearted as a high-water clam. That's what education has done for *him*.

"You never knew Anthony, my old butler? Well, I want to tell you, he *was* a servant, as *was* a servant. During Mrs. Slocomb's life"—here the major assumed a reminiscent air, pinching his fat chin with his thumb and forefinger—"we had, of co'se, a lot of niggers; but this man Anthony! By gravy! when he filled yo' glass with some of the old madeira that had rusted away in my cellar for half a century,"—here

the major now slipped his thumb into the armhole of his vest,—“it tasted like the nectar of the gods, just from the way Anthony poured it out.

“But you ought to have seen him move round the table when dinner was over! He'd draw himself up like a drum-major, and throw back the mahogany doors for the ladies to retire, with an air that was captivatn'.” The major was now on his feet—his reminiscent mood was one of his best. “That's been a good many years ago, colonel, but I can see him now just as plain as if he stood before me, with his white cotton gloves, white vest, and green coat with brass buttons, standin' behind Mrs. Slocomb's chair. I can see the old sidebo'd, suh, covered with George III. silver, heirlooms of a century,”—this with a trance-like movement of his hand across his eyes. “I can see the great Italian marble mantels suppo'ted on lions' heads, the inlaid floor and wainscotin'.”—Here the major sank upon the divan again, shutting both eyes reverently, as if these memories of the past were a sort of religion with him.

“And the way those niggers loved us! And the many holes they helped us out of. Sit down there, and let me tell you what Anthony did for me once.” I obeyed cheerfully. “Some years ago I received a telegram from a very intimate friend of mine, a distinguished Baltimorean,—the Nestor of the Maryland bar, suh,—informin' me that he was on his way South, and that he would make my house his home on the followin' night.” The major's eyes were still shut. He had passed out of his reverential mood, but the effort to be absolutely exact demanded concentration.