

## **“The Partners”**

**Charles W. Chesnutt**

AMONG the human flotsam and jetsam that followed in the wake of the Civil War, there drifted into a certain Southern town, shortly after the surrender, two young colored men, named respectively William Cain and Rufus Green. They had made each other's acquaintance in a refugee camp attached to an army cantonment, and when the soldiers went away, William and Rufus were thrown upon their own resources. They were fast friends, and discussed with each other the subject of their future.

"Well, ez fer me," said William, "my marster had put me ter de bricklayer's an' plasterer's trade, an' I'd wukked at it six weeks befo' I come away. I hadn' larnt eve'ything, but I reckon I knows ernuff ter make a livin' at it."

"Ez fer me," returned Rufus gloomily -- he was not of the most cheerful temperament -- "I don' know how ter use nuffin' but a hoe."

"I has ter use de hoe in my bizness too," rejoined William. "De mo'tar has ter be mix' wid a hoe. W'y can't we go in podners? You kin mix de mo'tar, an' I'll put it on, tel I've larnt you all I knows. We'll keep ou' money tergether, an' w'at I makes shill be ez much yo'n ez mine, an' w'at you makes shill be ez much mine ez yo'n, an' w'at we bofe makes shill belong ter bofe of us. How would dat 'rangement suit you?"

Rufus, having felt some alarm at the prospect of facing the world alone -- slavery had not been a good school for training in self-reliance -- found this proposition a very agreeable one, and promptly express- ed his willingness to accept it.

"And now," said William, who thus early in the affair assumed the initiative, "we ought to hab somethin' ter show ou' agreement -- dat's de way w'ite folks does bizness, an' we'll hafter do de same. I knows a man roun' here w'at kin write, an' we'll git some paper an' hab him draw up de articles."

The scribe and the paper were found, and William dictated the following agreement, the phraseology of which is reminiscent of certain solemn forms which he had heard used from time to time, being town-bred and accustomed to the ways of the world: --

"William Cain and Rufus Green is gone in partners this day to work at whatever their hands find to do. What they makes shall belong to one as much as the other, and they shall stand by each other in sickness and in health, in good luck and in bad, till death shall us part, and the Lord have mercy on our souls. Amen."

This was written in a doubtful hand, on each of two sheets of foolscap paper, and signed by the partners with their respective marks. Each received a copy of the agreement, and they promised the man a half-dollar for his services, to be paid out of their first earnings.

Having found a place to live, William and Rufus settled down as well as their uncertain fortunes would permit. It soon became apparent that William was the more capable of the two, and equally clear -- to his patrons at least -- that he had not worked at his trade long enough to learn to do fine work. In consequence of the discovery, the partners soon themselves engaged almost solely in the white-washing and patching business, at which they were fairly successful. Even here, however, William's relative superiority manifested itself, and he generally wielded the brush while Rufus mixed the whitewash. When business was slack, they engaged in such manual labor as they could find. They ate together, slept together, and had a common purse, from which they supplied their necessities and had a little left for amusements and tobacco.

They were living thus, in a hand-to-mouth way, but with the cheerful contentment characteristic of their race, when a Northern philanthropist, filled with the fine, post-bellum zeal for the freedmen, purchased at a low price an extensive plantation in the vicinity of the town, which he cut up into small farms, and, for the encouragement of industry and thrift among the Negroes, sold to them at prices little more than nominal. All but two of the farms had been disposed of before he discovered William and Rufus. Learning that they lived in what they called partnership, he informed them that such a relation was incompatible with the development of self-reliance and strength of character, and that their best interests would be promoted by their learning each to fight his own battle. A thoughtful student of history might have suggested to the philanthropist that the power of highly developed races lies mainly in their ability to combine for the better accomplishment of a common purpose. The good man meant well, however, and his method was admirably adapted to separate the wheat from the chaff. His arguments, or his liberal offer, proved effective; William and Rufus put away the whitewash pails and brushes and became freeholders and farmers upon adjoining tracts of land.

The soil was fertile, and the new owners were filled with the buoyant hopefulness and zeal which characterized the colored people immediately after their emancipation, when there seemed to be a rosy future for their race, not in some distant generation, when the memory of their bondage should have become dim and legendary, but for themselves and their children. The good philanthropist, waiving for the moment his theory of self-reliance -- of which indeed his whole generous scheme was a contradiction -- gave his beneficiaries advice and oversight for several years, during which William and Rufus, in company with their neighbors, thrived apace. In much less time than even the philanthropist had anticipated, both farms were paid for, and William and Rufus tasted the pleasures which any healthy-minded man feels when he first knows himself owner, in fee simple, by metes and bounds, of a piece of the soil which, in a broader sense, is the common heritage of mankind.

During the first years of their separation William and Rufus remained fast friends. The friendship, like their former partnership, was of more practical benefit to Rufus than to William. It was largely due to William's advice about plowing and planting and harvesting, to William's superior knowledge of horses and cattle and hogs, and his more trustworthy intuitions about wind and weather, that Rufus had been able to pay for his farm and procure his deed at the same time with William. This aid, too, was rendered spontaneously, and so much as a matter of course, that Rufus, who was a man of slow perceptions, flattered himself upon being a very successful farmer, and on the high-road to substantial wealth.

Nevertheless, as the years rolled on, William's greater prosperity became apparent even to Rufus, who began gradually to appreciate the fact that William's fields bore larger crops, that his cows calved oftener and gave more milk, that his hogs were fatter and better bred, that his hens laid more eggs and suffered less from fox or hawk, or other thieves.

Shortly after becoming a landowner Rufus had married a wife, who in time bore him several children. William, too, had selected a helpmeet, with a like effect upon his household. The first rift in the long friendship came one day when one of William's children and one of Rufus's had a juvenile dispute, which, if left to themselves, they would have forgotten in an hour. Their mothers, however, took up the quarrel, and having longer memories, became somewhat estranged over it. Since the families were near neighbors and had long been dependent upon one another for the exchange of neighborly courtesies, a quarrel was irksome to say the least. At first William and Rufus paid no attention to the misunderstanding, its only effect upon them being that they met and talked along the turnrows and across fences rather than by each other's firesides. As it was, the trouble would probably soon have been smoothed over, had not the demon Envy, with its train of malice and all uncharitableness, taken possession of Rufus's wife and passed from her to her husband.

Mrs. William Cain came out to church one Sunday in a new frock. Rufus was unable, at the moment, to buy his wife a garment equally handsome. To make matters worse, William drove Mrs. Cain to church the same day in a new buggy, a luxury in which Rufus, who, like William himself, had hitherto walked to church or driven thither in his cart, could not as yet afford to indulge.

"Dat Cain 'oman is puttin' on mo' airs 'n ef she own' somebody," sniffed Mrs. Rufus. "She jes' displayin' dem clo's, an' he's jes' bought dat buggy -- he must 'a' got it on credit - - jes' ter show off an' make us feel po' an' mean. Rufus, ef you are de man I take you fer, you won' have nuthin' mo' ter do wid dem people!"

When William next saw Rufus working near the fence and walk- ed down to pass the time of day, Rufus saw him coming and moved farther away. For the first few times that this occurred, William sup- posed it to be a mere coincidence; but when Rufus one day passed him on the road without speaking, even the pretence of deep absorption in thought did not deceive William. His old friend had turned against him, and he felt sore at heart.

Surely a friendship of such long standing ought not to be broken because of a few hard words by two quick-tempered women on account of a children's quarrel.

It occurred to William that perhaps he might pour oil upon the troubled waters. One Saturday evening he sent his hired man over to Rufus's house with a message.

"My boss wants ter know," said the messenger, "ef you wouldn't lack ter borry his buggy ter-morrer afternoon an' take a ride somewhar."

This seemed to Rufus very kind of William, and he was on the point of accepting the offer, when Mrs. Green broke in: --

"You kin go an' tell William Cain dat we don' go ridin' in borried buggies; dat w'en we git able ter pay fer a buggy, we'll ride, an' not be trapesin' roun' de country showin' off in buggies w'at ain't paid fer!"

This message, delivered with fidelity both to language and spirit, aroused some righteous resentment in William's bosom. If Rufus preferred enmity to friendship, William concluded that he would at least not force his good offices upon his neighbor, but would hereafter wait until they were requested. He knew from past experience that Rufus would need them sooner or later. As a consequence of this mutual coolness, the breach between the neighbors became, if not wider, at least more pronounced.

The purchase of the buggy and the incidents growing out of it, had taken place in the autumn, after the crops had been gathered and sold. During the following winter Rufus's sweet potatoes, which had not been properly put up, began to rot, and almost his entire supply was spoiled before he became aware of their condition. During any other winter, William, whose potatoes always kept well, would have lent him, at a nominal price, enough potatoes to tide him over the season. This time, however, Rufus was compelled to pay winter prices for his potatoes, and cart them home from the town, five miles away.

Henceforth misfortune seemed to follow Rufus. His cows went dry, and the family had to get along without milk, while they could see, as they drove along the road, William's pigs feeding upon the surplus of his dairy. One of Rufus's two horses was taken sick. Upon a similar occasion, the winter before, William had suggested treatment which had cured the complaint. Rufus administered the same remedy for a different disease, and the horse died. So far had the ill-feeling toward his neighbor gone that Rufus ascribed the death of the horse to William, instead of to his own folly in giving the medicine without a proper understanding of the ailment.

William would have been willing at any moment to resume their former relations, upon proper advances from Rufus, of whose misfortunes he was indeed not fully informed, for intercourse between the two families had entirely ceased and even the children were forbidden to play together. The line that separated their farms marked as well the boundary between two school districts, and the children went in opposite

directions to different schools. But there came a time when even William's patience was exhausted, and he began to feel something like anger toward his whilom friend.

The rear part of William's farm consisted of a low meadow, through which ran a small stream. With the instinct of a wise farmer seeking to diversify his crops to the best advantage, William had planted this meadow in rice, with very good results. In the cultivation of this cereal it was necessary, now and then, to flood the meadow. This had heretofore been accomplished easily by damming up the stream at the point where it left William's land, whereby it overspread its banks and overflowed the low ground. This had resulted also in flooding Rufus's meadow, which was of similar location and extent, and through which the stream flowed before reaching William's land; but as Rufus had hitherto followed William's advice and example in the matter of planting rice, this overflow was mutually satisfactory and profitable to both.

In the season that followed the beginning of this alienation of an old friendship, Rufus planted his meadow in rice; but lacking William's wisdom, and not having the benefit of his advice, Rufus's crop proved a failure, and the following year he determined to plant the meadow in corn. Having received no notice of his neighbor's intention to change the crop, William planted rice as usual, and in due time dammed up the stream in order to flood the meadow. When Rufus saw the water coming upon his corn, he said nothing to William, but went to consult a lawyer, who advised an injunction. A lawsuit was accordingly begun, and William restrained from backing up the water on the adjoining land.

It was this unneighborly conduct on the part of Rufus that turned the milk of William's friendship into the gall of enmity. He employed the best lawyer in the county, and instructed him to fight the lawsuit to the bitter end.

A quarrel between adjoining land-owners is usually a tedious affair, with many collateral complications, and the law's delays are proverbial. In the course of the next year or two it became necessary, at a certain stage of the proceedings, to make a detailed plat of Rufus's farm, for which purpose a surveyor was employed. In order to perform his work properly, the surveyor went to the county records and procured an exact copy of the description in Rufus's deed. When with his instruments he went to survey Rufus's lines he made a remarkable discovery -- the deed did not convey that piece of land at all, but contained a repetition of the description of another parcel in the philanthropist's allotment, previously sold to a different purchaser.

The surveyor was -- he believed unjustly -- a poor man. His ancestors had once been rich in land and slaves. His grandfather had once owned the very plantation out of which Rufus's farm had been carved. The family had been ruined by the war. Driving past these flourishing farms, the surveyor had often thought they ought to be his own. Now he had discovered that one of the best of them was occupied by a Negro who held it under a clouded title. After a very brief struggle with his conscience, the surveyor made a long journey. In a distant Northern city he found a descendant of the philanthropist, who had met with reverses and had died in comparative poverty. Upon certain plausible

representations the surveyor procured, for a small sum, a quit-claim deed of all the right, title and interest of the philanthropist's heir in the land occupied and improved for many years by Rufus. Armed with this document he returned home and began an action in ejectment.

The writ served upon Rufus fell like a bombshell in the heart of his household. Never had he so needed the advice and moral support of his former friend as when he first comprehended the import of the proceedings now begun against him. If he had followed his first impulse, he would have gone and begged his friend's pardon for his own past conduct, to which, he obscurely realized, the alienation of recent years was almost entirely due. Some such suggestion to his wife evoked, however, a torrent of indignant protest.

"Beg his pa'don indeed!" she cried. "He's 'sponsable fer all ou' troubles. Ef he had n' dammed up dat creek you never would 'a' gone ter law, an' den you would n' 'a' h'ed no su'veyor, an' all dis trouble would n' 'a' come on us. He's 'sponsable fer it all, an' you sha' n't go nigh 'im."

So Rufus went for advice to his lawyer, who tried the case and lost it on a technicality. A better advocate might have won it. A rich man, properly advised, might have taken the case to a higher court with a fair prospect of ultimate success. But Rufus's misfortunes, including the expenses of litigation, had exhausted his cash and his credit, both of which had been derived from the property now decreed to be no longer his. He lost the spring of hope, and yielded to what seemed the inevitable. His wife took the blow as hard, but in a different manner.

"You're no 'count at all," she said to Rufus bitterly. "I ma'ied a man wid land an' hosses an' cows an' hawgs. Now after ten years er slavin', w'at is I got? A man wid nuthin', an' not much er dat! I've wukked myse'f ter skin an' bone, fer who? Fer a w'ite man! I mought as well never 'a' be'n freed. But I'll do so no longer! Hencefo'th you c'n go yo' way an' I'll go mine."

She went away in anger, taking her two children and moving to the neighboring town, where she rented a small room and took in washing for a living. Rufus still lingered at the farm, which he had received a two-weeks' notice to vacate. Several times during the first week he had seen William near the line fence, looking toward the house that must soon be occupied by strangers. Perhaps William was sorry for his old friend -- more likely he was gloating over his fallen enemy. Rufus hardened his heart and stiffened his neck, and when he saw William, looked the other way.

On the last day of the second week Rufus harnessed up the old sore-backed horse, his sole remaining beast of burden, to the rickety spring wagon which in the apathy of hopelessness he had not cleaned or repaired for several months. Only the day before he had seen the new owner riding along the road with his wife, inspecting their future domain. Rufus had rented an abandoned log cabin in the woods not far away, where he could hide his diminished head in shame; and he hoped to procure day's work on the

neighboring farms, whereby to keep body and soul together. He would resign his deaconship in the church, and henceforth lead the life of obscurity for which alone his meager talents qualified him. It was hard, nevertheless, to leave the land that he had labored upon for so many years, the house he had built with his own hands, and in which he had expected to spend his declining years in peaceful comfort -- it was very, very hard.

He loaded the wagon with his few remaining chattels -- his wife had taken some, and others had been sold. When he had brought the last piece out of the house, he sat down upon the doorstep and buried his face in his hands. In that moment of self-examination the true source of his misfortunes became entirely clear to him. Long he sat there, until even the sore-backed horse turned his head with an air of mild surprise in his lack-lustre eye.

"Rufus!"

So deeply had Rufus been absorbed in his own somber thoughts that he had not seen William climb over the fence and approach the house. At the sound of his voice so near at hand, Rufus looked up and saw William standing before him with outstretched hand.

"No, William," said Rufus, shaking his head slowly, "I could n' shake han's wid you."

"Stop yo' foolishness, Rufus, an' listen ter me? Gimme yo' han'!"

"No, William," returned Rufus sadly, "I ain' fitten fer ter tech yo' han'. You wuz my bes' frien'; you made me w'at I wuz; an' I tu'ned my back on you, an' ha'dened my heart lak Farro of ole Egyp' ter de child'en er Is'ael. You had never done me nuthin' but good; but I went ter de law 'g'inst you, an' den de law come ter me -- an' I've be'n sarved right! I ain' fitten' ter tech yo' han', William. Go 'long an' leave me ter my punishment!"

"You has spoke de truf, Rufus, de Lord's truf! but ef I kin fergive w'at you done ter me, dey ain' no 'casion fer you ter bear malice 'ginst yo'se'f. Git up f'm dere, man, an' gimme yo' han', an' den listen ter my wo'ds!"

Rufus rose slowly, and taking each other's hands they buried their enmity in a prolonged and fervent clasp.

"An' now Rufus," said William drawing from his pocket an old yellow paper, through which the light shone along the seams where it had been folded, "does you reco'nize dat paper?"

"No, William, you 'member I never l'arned ter read."

"Well, I has, an' I'll read dis paper ter you:

"William Cain an' Rufus Green is gone in partners this day to work at whatever their hands find to do. What they makes shall belong to one as much as the other, and they

shall stand by each other in sickness and in health, in good luck and in bad, till death shall us part, and the Lord have mercy on our souls. Amen."

"Ou' ole podnership paper, William," said Rufus sadly, "ou' ole podnership, w'at wuz broke up ten years ago!"

"Broke up? Who said it wuz broke up?" exclaimed William. It says 'in good luck an' in bad, till death shall us part,' an' it means w'at it says! Do you suppose de Lord would have mussy on my soul ef I wuz ter fersake my ole podner at de time er his greates' trouble? He would n' be a jes' God ef he did! Come 'long now, Rufus, an' we'll put dem things back in yo' house, an onhitch dat hoss. You ain' gwine ter stir one foot f'm dis place, onless it's ter go home ter dinner wid me. I've seen my lawyer, an' he says you got plenty er time yit ter 'peal you' case an' take it ter de upper co't, wid eve'y chance ter win it -- an' he's a hones' man, w'at knows de law. I've got money in de bank, an' w'at's mine is yo'n till yo' troubles is ended, an' f'm dis time fo'th we is podners 'till death shall us part."