

DOWN THE RIVER

by MARK TWAIN

adapted for the stage by WALTER WYKES

CHARACTERS

TOM

ROXY

TIME

1850

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DOWN THE RIVER

[A humble lodging in St. Louis. Outside there is a heavy downpour. The year is 1850. TOM enters. Closing his umbrella and crossing the room to turn up the gas, he notices someone stepping out of the dark corner of the room. TOM freezes as this figure, wearing a wreck of old shabby clothes, its face hidden, crosses behind TOM and locks the door.]

TOM

Who ... who are you?! How did you get in here?! What do you want?!

ROXY

Keep still—I's yo' mother.

[She reveals her face. Silence.]

TOM

It ... it was mean of me, and base—I know it.

[Pause.]

I meant it for the best, I did ... I swear.

[Pause.]

I didn't know what else to do.

[ROXY stares hard at him as he writhes in shame. After a long moment, she seats herself and takes off her hat, an unkempt mass of long brown hair tumbling down about her shoulders.]

ROXY

[Indicating her hair.]

It ain't no fault o' yo'n dat dey ain't grey.

TOM

I know, I know! I'm a worthless scoundrel! But I swear I meant it for the best. It was the only way out—the only way I could see to right things. It was a mistake, of course, and I wouldn't do it again, but I thought it was for the best, I truly did.

ROXY

Sell a pusson down de river ... down de river—for de bes'?! I wouldn't treat a dog like you's treated yo' po' mother!

[Pause.]

I's all broke down en wore out, now. I reckon it ain't in me to storm aroun' no mo', like I used to when I 'uz trompled on en 'bused. I's suffered so much dat mournin' seem to come mo' handy to me now den stormin'.

[Pause.]

Shet down dat light a little. More. More yit. A pusson dat's hunted don't like de light. Dah. Dat'll do. I kin see whah you is, en dat's enough.

[Pause.]

I's gwine to tell you de tale, en cut it jes as short as I kin. Dat man dat bought me ain't a bad man. He's good enough, as planters goes. En if he could 'a' had his way I'd 'a' be'n a house servant in his fambly en be'n comfortable. But his wife she was a Yank, en not right down good lookin', en she riz up agin me straight off. So den dey sent me out to de quarter 'mongst de common fiel' han's. But dat woman warn't satisfied even wid dat. She worked up de overseer ag'in' me. She 'uz dat jealous en hateful. So de overseer had me out befo' day in de mawnin's en worked me de whole long day as long as dey 'uz any light to see by, en many's de lashin's I got 'ca'se I couldn't come up to de work o' de stronges'. Dat overseer wuz a Yank too, outen New Englan', en anybody down South kin tell you what dat mean. DEY knows how to work a niggah to death, en dey knows how to whale 'em too—whale 'em till dey backs is welted like a washboard. 'Long at fust my marster say de good word for me to de overseer, but dat 'uz bad for me, for de mistis she fine it out, en arter dat I jist ketched it at every turn. Dey warn't no mercy for me no mo'. 'Bout ten days ago I 'uz sayin' to myself dat I couldn't las' many mo' weeks I 'uz so wore out wid de awful work en de lashin's en so downhearted en misable. En I didn't care no mo'. Nuther life warn't wuth noth'n' to me, if I got to go on like dat. Well, dey was a little sickly niggah girl 'bout ten year ole dat 'uz good to me, en hadn't no mammy, po' thing, en I loved her en she loved me; en she come out whah I uz' workin' en she had a roasted tater, en tried to slip it to me. Robbin' herself, you see, 'ca'se she knowed de overseer didn't give me enough to eat en he ketched her at it, en give her a lick acrost de back wid his stick, which 'uz as thick as a broom handle, en she drop' screamin' on de groun', en squirmin' en wallerin' aroun' in de dust like a spider dat's got crippled. I couldn't stan' it. All de hellfire dat 'uz ever in my heart flame' up, en I snatch de stick outen his han' en laid him flat. He laid dah moanin' en cussin', en all out of his head, you know, en de niggahs 'uz plumb sk'yred to death. Dey gathered roun' him to he'p him, en I jumped on his hoss en took out for de river as tight as I could go. I knowed what dey would do wid me. Soon as he got well he would start in en work me to death if marster let him; en if dey didn't do dat, they'd sell me funder down de river, en dat's de same thing. So I 'lowed to drown myself en git out o' my troubles. It 'uz gitt'n' towards dark. I 'uz at de river in two minutes. Den I see a canoe, en I says dey ain't no use to drown myself tell I got to; so I went on a spinnin' down de river paddled mo'n two days and when I got here I went straight to whah you used to wuz, en den I come to dis house, en dey say you's away but 'spected back every day; so I didn't dast to go down de river to Dawson's, 'ca'se I might miss you. Well, las' Monday I 'uz pass'n by one o' dem places in fourth street whah dey sticks up runaway niggah bills, en he'ps to ketch 'em, en I seed my marster! I 'mos' flopped down on de groun', I felt so gone. He had his back to me, en 'uz

talkin' to de man en givin' him some bills—niggah bills, I reckon, en I's de niggah. He's offerin' a reward. Dat's it. Ain't I right, don't you reckon?

[A flash of lightning exposes TOM'S pallid face, drawn and rigid. ROXY continues, with rising apprehension in her voice.]

Turn up dat light! I want to see yo' face better. Dah now—lemme look at you. Chambers, you's as white as yo' shirt! Has you see dat man? Has he be'n to see you?

[Pause.]

TOM

Yes.

ROXY

When?

TOM

Monday noon.

ROXY

Monday noon! Was he on my track?

TOM

He ... well, he thought he was. That is, he hoped he was. This is the bill you saw.

[TOM pulls a bill out of his pocket.]

ROXY

Read it to me!

TOM

One hundred dollar reward. Escaped slave. Named Roxana. Contact Fourth Street agency.

ROXY

Gimme de bill!

TOM

Why, it isn't any use to you, you can't read it. What do you want with it?

ROXY

Gimme de bill!

[TOM gives it to her reluctantly.]

Did you read it all to me?

TOM
Of course.

ROXY
You's lyin'!

TOM
What would I want to lie about it for?

ROXY
I don't know—but you is.

[ROXY scrutinizes TOM closely.]

When I seed dat man, I 'uz dat sk'yerd dat I could scasely wobble home. Den I give a niggah man a dollar for dese clo'es, en I ain't be'n in a house sence, night ner day, till now. I laid hid in de cellar of a ole house dat's burnt down, daytimes en robbed de sugar hogsheads en grain sacks on de wharf, nights, to git somethin' to eat, en never dast to come near dis place till dis rainy night, when dey ain't no people roun' scasely. But to-night I ben astannin' in de dark alley ever sence night come, waitin' for you to go by. En here I is.

[Pause.]

You seed dat man at noon, las' Monday?

TOM
Yes.

ROXY
I seed him de middle o' dat arternoon. He hunted you up, didn't he?

TOM
I guess so.

ROXY
Did he give you de bill dat time?

TOM
No, he hadn't got it printed yet.

ROXY
Did you he'p him fix up de bill?

[Pause.]

TOM

You know, now that I think about it, it was at noon Monday that he gave me the bill.

ROXY

You's lyin' agin!

TOM

No—

ROXY

Shut yo' mouth! Now den, I's gwyne to ast you a question, en I wants to know how you's gwyne to git aroun' it. You knowed he 'uz arter me; en if you runs off, 'stid o' stayin' here to he'p him, he'd know dey 'uz somthin' wrong 'bout dis business, en den he would inquire 'bout you, en dat would take him to yo' uncle, en yo' uncle would read de bill en see dat you ben sellin' a free niggah down de river, en you know him, I reckon! He'd tar up de will en kick you outen de house. Now, den, you answer me dis question: hain't you tole dat man dat I would be sho' to come here, en den you would fix it so he could set a trap en ketch me?

[Long pause.]

TOM

[His face beginning to take on an ugly look.]

Well, what else could I do?! You see, yourself, that I was in his grip and couldn't get out! You left me no choice—running off the way you did!

ROXY

What could you do? You could be Judas to yo' own mother to save yo' wuthless hide! Would anybody b'lieve it? No—a dog couldn't! You is de low-downest orneriest hound dat was ever pupp'd into dis worl'—en I's 'sponsible for it!

[ROXY spits on TOM—he does not attempt to resist.]

Now I'll tell you what you's gwyne to do. You's gwyne to give dat man de money dat you's got laid up, en make him wait till you kin go to yo' uncle en git de res' en buy me free agin'!

TOM

Do you know what you're asking me to do?! Go and ask him for more than three hundred dollars! What on earth would I tell him I want it for?!

ROXY

You'll tell him de truf. Dat you's sole yo' own mother to pay yo' gamblin' debts, en dat you lied to me en was a villain, en dat I 'quires you to git dat money en buy me back ag'in!

TOM

You've gone stark raving mad! He'd tear the will to shreds in a minute! He'd disinherit me!

ROXY

I'm sure he will.

TOM

You don't really think I'm stupid enough to go to him then—do you?

ROXY

I don't think nothin'—I knows it! En you know why? I knows it beca'se you knows dat if you don't raise dat money I'll go to him myself, en den he'll sell you down the river, en you kin see how you like it!

[TOM rises, trembling.]

TOM

I ... I have to get out of here. I have to clear my head.

[He tries the door, but it won't budge.]

ROXY

I's got the key, honey—set down. You needn't cle'r up yo' brain none to fine out what you gwyne to do—I already tole you what you's gwyne to do.

[TOM sits and begins to pass his hands through his hair with a helpless and desperate air. ROXY watches him carefully.]

Is dat man in dis house?

TOM

What ... what gives you that idea?

ROXY

You did. Gwyne out to cle'r yo' brain! In de fust place you ain't got none to cle'r, en in de second place yo' ornery eye tole on you. You's de low-downest hound dat ever ... but I done tole you dat befo'. Now, den, dis is Friday. You kin fix it up wid dat man, en tell him you's gwyne away to git de res' o' de money, en dat you'll be back wid it nex' Tuesday, or maybe Wednesday. You understan'?

TOM

Yes.

ROXY

En when you gits de new bill o' sale dat sells me to my own self, take en send it in de mail to yo' uncle, en write on de back dat he's to keep it till I come. You understand'?

TOM

I understand.

ROXY

Dat's all, den. Take yo' umbreller, en put on yo' hat.

TOM

Why?

ROXY

Beca'se you's gwyne to see me home to de wharf. You see dis knife? I's toted it aroun' sence de day I seed dat man en bought dese clo'es en it. If he ketched me, I 'uz gwyne to kill myself wid it. Now start along, en go sof', en lead de way; en if you gives a sign in dis house, or if anybody comes up to you in de street, I's gwyne to jam it into you. Chambers, does you b'lieve me when I says dat?

TOM

I know your word's good.

ROXY

Tha's right! It's diff'rent from yo'n! Now shet de light out en move along.

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