

THE QUEEN OF THE VOODOOS.

Remarkable Career of Mammy Pleasant and Her Wonderful Influence Over Men and Women.

MAMMY PLEASANT, the mill-mannered old Southern mammy of romantic newspaper writers, with her spotless white apron and neckerchief and her clinking bunch of keys, and her general air of contrition for being so good, has been for many years the most discussed woman in San Francisco. Others have drawn public attention now and again, and for a little brief space have dimmed her prominence, but Mammy seems to bloom perpetually.

Half a dozen times gossip has had her on the point of death; nineteen years ago the papers painted a painful picture of the old woman broken in health, her mind shattered and tottering on the verge of dissolution. She has been called a pauper, then a millionaire, a devout Catholic, a Methodist, a leader among the Baptists, the essence of truth and a perjurer, a friend of the poor, and a woman who turned every human passion and folly to her own advantage, and who used the people that she chose to associate with as so many pawns on a chess board.

Mary Ellen Pleasant, for that is her correct name, has been all, and at the same time none of these things. But in the whole of her career it is certain that she has never feigned a virtue or done a vicious thing that had not for its ultimate object something of benefit to herself. A woman with wonderful persuasive powers, and something very like a hypnotic influence over weaker members of her own sex, she has been placed in dozens of positions of trust and has many times been administrative of estates. Every property of this character that Mammy has controlled has faded into thin air. Charges of mal-administration, of helping criminals to escape from jails, and of various far more serious than these have been brought against her, but in her whole forty-eight years of residence in California she has laughed at courts, defied the orders of Judges and has emerged somehow from every tight corner in which she has been placed.

A few weeks ago Mammy was adjudged an insolvent debtor. Last Monday she went to one of the attorneys for her creditors and asked him for a dollar with which to buy food. The following day she appeared at the house of a colored woman of her acquaintance, a noted gossip, and took away a loaf of bread with her, claiming she was hungry. That is Mammy's way of showing the world that she is a poverty-stricken bankrupt. People who are in a position to know say that she is worth considerably more than a quarter of a million dollars. This fact, however, will not help her creditors very much. When she was posing for a photograph the other day for the "Chronicle" she was asked what she intended to do with her creditors.

"Do," she replied. "Why, I am jes' sitting looking on. If they find anything, I'll get up and take it away from 'em. But they ain't going to find anything, so I won't need to disturb myself no-how."

Just thirty years ago, when Mammy was in high favor with the wealthy young millionaires of San Francisco, she established a resort on the old San Jose road, and called it Geneva cottage. What happened there during the first year of its occupancy may best be passed over without comment, but after that, when the old negro found herself without proteges, and when visitors to her vine-covered roadhouse had begun to drop off in consequence, she became a rancher, and went in for raising hogs and chickens. Every morning, dressed in blue jeans and a woolen shirt, with a slouch hat on her head, she would drive a team into town and dispose of her produce at the old Washington market.

A few weeks ago, driven out of the Bell mansion and seeking an abiding place where she might rusticate till the storm of her insolvency proceedings had blown over, she thought of Geneva cottage, and taking with her as much of the Bell furniture as she could gather up at short notice from the various residences of the millionaire's estate, she moved out to the old place and went back along the San Jose road to live.

Room in plenty for a pathetic bit of word painting here—the swing of the pendulum after thirty years with Mammy, at the latter end broken down, poverty stricken, surrounded by enemies and in her last ditch. But unfortunately for the plot, Mammy in 1844 was always an unbending and as keen-witted as she was at 40.

Even with a complete knowledge of her career, in which she has bent hundreds of people to her will, and a thorough insight into her cunning and treacherous nature, you cannot help feeling some measure of admiration for this tall, spare negro as she faces you, erect as a girl of 20, with vigorous mentality displayed in every move she makes and every sentence she utters.

In order to avoid attendance at court it has been necessary for her several times of late to feign sickness. She has become an adept at this kind of deception, though there is something humorous in the thought of a woman over 50 years old being compelled to make a pretense of physical ailments. But this is actually what Mammy has to do, for nature has been more than kind to her, and she has had very little experience in actual bodily suffering in her long life. Her imitation sickness takes two forms. To use her own words they are "dissy, spells" and "spasmodics," and among other things she boasts that at no time in the last fifteen years has she been without three or four doctors' certificates of ill health, signed in blank to be used whenever it is inexpedient for her to answer an order of court. On these occasions, to quote her again, "I generally writes in the blank parts, and the Court jes' has to whistle."

It has always been a great mystery to Mammy's friends and acquaintances

what means she took to practice her so-called voodoo art, and what properties she used in the business. A few days after her eviction from the Bell house, recently, the two rooms that she had occupied for many years on the second floor of the mansion were searched. They disclosed a miscellaneous mass of material, including powdered cork dust, hundreds of singed cock's feathers, calico torn into very finest strips, a bottle of lampblack and numerous other articles, all of which she utilized in her secret practices.

This voodoo fad of Mammy's is the only sign of mental weakness or aberration that she has given in her whole career. Her tricks with the implements named, as told by the children of the house, were very simple and must have been the remnant of some myth, handed down to Mammy when she was little more than a pickaninny on the Helmecken estate in Virginia; and along these narrow strips of calico she would draw grotesque images with the lampblack, and then singe the under part of them with burning cock's feathers. At the same time pronouncing her wishes in a mumbling voice and asking some unknown deity to help her out in her numerous enterprises.

An instance of her thorough belief in these gypsy superstitions came out during the trial of the famous Sharon case, when several witnesses swore that Sarah Althea, acting under the advice of Mammy, had gone to a graveyard on a May day and had planted a pair of Sharon's socks and one of the millionaire's shirts in the ground. Sarah Althea had been informed by her colored guide that this was a sure way to win back Sharon's affections. Although the fact was proven in court beyond any doubt, Mammy brought in several witnesses, including Thomas Bell himself, to swear that on that day Sarah Althea had never left the Bell house, where she was stopping. And a curious fact in connection with this attempted alibi has just come to light; it is that all of Mammy's witnesses to this particular testimony believed that they were tell-

ing the truth, but the woman they really saw in the Bell house was Emma Sterrett, painted to resemble Sarah Althea; both women looked very much alike under natural conditions anyway, and people who had only seen them a few times were very easily deceived.

Whatever effect Mammy's voodoo art may have had upon her victims can never be known, but it is certain that she has shown wonderful power of persuasion that compels one to credit her with some sense outside of mere ability to argue. Many people who know her best claim that she possesses hypnotic powers in a remarkable degree; the long story of Mrs. Theresa Bell's life, which has already been told in detail in the "Chronicle," proves that some incomprehensible power existed; and it is also known that Thomas Bell himself, always reckoned as a shrewd man of affairs, was deceived and tricked a thousand times by Mammy's false representations to him. Once when she was badly in need of money for one of her numerous deals she sent Mrs. Bell over to San Leandro, and, after keeping her there a week, announced to Thomas Bell that she had gone on to New York for a vacation and asked for \$25,000 to be forwarded to her. Bell paid the money, and, ten days later, Mammy went to him again in great agitation and stated that Mrs. Bell had been robbed of all her coin in New York, telling him it was absolutely necessary to forward an additional \$25,000 to New York; Bell gave this money to Mammy and the following day Mrs. Bell returned to the house.

The trapping of Bernard Saville, himself a polished schemer, now serving a term of imprisonment in San Quentin, is another instance of Mammy's persuasive art. She tricked him so completely that the day before his intended marriage to Mrs. Bell he went to Mammy, with his arms around her neck, and thanked her for all she had done for him, promising to provide well for her as soon as he was Mrs. Bell's husband. Inside of twenty-four hours Saville was in the hands of the police, and Mammy was never afterward threatened with the loss of Mrs. Bell through the success of any suitor for her hand.

The well-known Brotherton brothers, who were convicted in this city in May, 1870, of felony, fell under Mammy's all-seeing eye and before she had finished with them and cast them off she had

done handsomely for herself through both of them. It has always been believed, although on a trial of the charge Mammy was acquitted, that she effected the escape of these two prisoners from the County Jail on Broadway. At any rate, it is known positively that for a week after their escape they were in hiding in the basement of 322 Washington street, a place rented by Mammy for their reception after they broke jail, and that she purchased the wigs with which they were to disguise themselves when they attempted to leave the country. There is little doubt that Mammy secured some thousands of dollars to effect this escape, and that the jailer who conveniently allowed himself to be gagged and pinioned was well greased for his little experience, leaving, however, a handsome profit for Mammy. One day she went down to the cellar—into the Washington-street cellar—and told the boys that everything was ready for their escape; she said she intended to take them out to her ranch on the San Jose road, where she now lives, by way of Howard street; and that after keeping them in hiding there for some time would take the first chance of getting them off on a deep sea ship at Half-moon Bay. A reward of \$5000 had been offered for their capture, and by a peculiar combination of circumstances when the brothers, who had given up their arms to Mammy at her solicitation, reached the corner of Twentieth and

for the furniture insurance in the house, which has been empty for the whole of that time.

William Tomlinson, familiarly known to everybody who ever visited the Bell residence on Octavia street as "Blind Billy the Butler," is a Scotchman who has been in the Bell employ for many years. He is totally blind. Three years ago he received a draft for \$1300 from relative in Scotland. Mammy at once told him that she could pay him better interest than any bank and got him to hand her the cash. Last week he stated that though he had asked her repeatedly for a few dollars he could get nothing.

A beautiful gilt dining-room clock that Mammy bought from a firm in the city for \$150 she told Mrs. Bell cost her \$800, and took that amount out of the estate money to pay for it. A few weeks ago, when she left the house, she took the clock with her.

John Pitzer was up to the beginning of the present year one of Mammy's most devoted admirers. He has worked for her at one time and another since 1890 in an humble way. Six months ago he notified Mammy that out of his small savings he had managed to pile up \$250, and she advised him that the safest way to keep his money was to invest it in a good gold watch and chain, and offered to secure the article for him. He gave her the money and the next day was the proud possessor of a watch that Mammy told him was worth \$300, the balance of

easy to get a favorable decision out of him as it was to get a certificate of ill health from a doctor. In vulgar parlance Judge Coffey didn't do a thing to Mammy when she appeared before him in connection with this affair, but the next day she was around telling all her friends that people had been getting too suspicious with her connection with Department No. 8, and that she had ordered Coffey to make a "bluff" in order to straighten things out.

This, by the way, is another of her favorite schemes. When she was charged the other day with having swindled "Blind Billy" out of his money, this was her reply: "It's too bad about that Billy; the poor fellow worships the very ground I tread on, but it is to my interest to make people believe that we are enemies, so I tell him to abuse me and lie about me all he can; it breaks the poor fellow's heart though every time he has to do it."

The story of Mammy's connection with Rebecca Boone and the way in which she has used that woman to bleed the Bell estate out of over \$100,000 is still familiar to "Chronicle" readers. In every residence in this city belonging to the Bell estate, Mammy has installed negroes in charge, and has gradually depleted the Bell mansion on Octavia street of almost everything of value it possessed, by scattering the articles around among the other houses from which they have mysteriously disappeared from time to time. These houses, one at 719 Sutter, another at 1210 Pine, and a third at 49 Clara street, have all been furnished up with Bell money, but Mammy's colored retainers have rented rooms to clerks for business houses and banks in them for years, dividing up the proceeds with Mammy, even the rent of the residence becoming a charge on the Bell estate.

Since Mammy first started to spin her spider's web forty-eight years ago in this city, she has by some means or other become the administratrix of several estates. The well-known Park estate, consisting of property on Church street and other streets in this city, is one of these. Park, who was in the employ of the Postoffice Department, and a very weak man physically had been persuaded by Mammy, with an eye to the future, years before his death, that she was a distant relative. Park left a widow and five children. Mammy prevailed on Mrs. Park to borrow \$6000 from the Hibernia Bank on her property to loan to Mrs. Bell. Of course Mrs. Bell never saw the money, and a year ago the Hibernia Bank foreclosed on the Park family, who are now living here, absolutely penniless.

The Elder estate was another property manipulated by Mammy in some of the same manner. The Hall estate went into Mammy's clutches without much difficulty. She was appointed administratrix, four colored children being the heirs. She got them all into

the Bell home, made menials of them, paying for their keep with Bell money, and sold the estate property at the con-



consequently, the only correct portraits of her that have ever been printed.



Mammy Pleasant and the House in Which She Lives

the purchase money she had paid out of her own pocket because of his faithful years of service. Last January Pitzer, having left her employ and being nearly penniless, decided to pawn his watch. He then learned that it was worth only \$15.

In the face of these incidents, and they are only similar to hundreds of others that might be mentioned, it would be hard for one not understanding Mammy's methods to realize how she could ever have obtained the name of being a generous woman. Her method of getting people to believe this of her, however, was simply enough; often in a Sutter-street car, full of ladies and merchants returning to their homes, Mammy would ostentatiously give a conductor a \$5 gold piece and tell him to keep the change; she had a little basket with which she made almost daily trips down to Washington and Kearny streets, and would stop all her acquaintances on the way to notify them that she was bound on some errand of charity.

Mrs. Bell's own foolishness and easy stultification have been responsible in great measure for Mammy's alleged "honor." Her white apron alone, to say nothing of the bunch of keys that always dangled from it was worth thousands of dollars a year to her in making people believe that she was nothing but the honest old Southern nurse of the story book and a faithful servant of a millionaire family.

Much of her reputation in this respect, too, was based on her magnificent promises. There is hardly a colored man or woman in the city that Mammy has not at some time or another promised a share in her property when she died; this has always been one of her greatest confidence operations. In fact, many of her dupes still fondly imagine that they are "remembered in Mammy's will."

Another gift that Mrs. Pleasant possesses, in a remarkable degree, is the faculty of evading a pointed question, whether asked her privately or in a Courtroom. For many years she has nonplussed Judges of all kinds, and there are very few attorneys of prominence in this city who have not at some time or another had a tit with her, and given up in despair all hope of pinning her down to any deliberate statement of her affairs. A recent decision handed down by Judge Coffey, who has probably had more wordy battles with her than any other member of the bar or bench, practically declares her a perjurer. But Mammy does not mind a little thing like that.

It will be remembered that two years ago it was proved that Mammy had made a statement to the effect that Judge Coffey was only on the bench to do what she told him, and that it was as

lance Judge Coffey didn't do a thing to Mammy when she appeared before him in connection with this affair, but the next day she was around telling all her friends that people had been getting too suspicious with her connection with Department No. 8, and that she had ordered Coffey to make a "bluff" in order to straighten things out.

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not of Clay and Jones streets to Major Rathbone. She took the money and informed the Halls that it had all been eaten up in educating and keeping them, and turned them out.

The Harris estate, over which there has been much litigation, went in the same way, and property which was converted into cash for over \$8000 has never got out of Mammy's hands. The two young daughters of the Harris family are now leading degraded lives in Sacramento.

The Susanne estate, of which Mammy had herself made the executrix, and which consisted of three three-story houses and lots at 29, 31 and 33 Stone street, was transferred by her to Mrs. Boone, who made over in place of it a little shanty at the top of Pine street worth about \$200. Mammy declared to the two Susanne children that she had done her best—that the "Villainous Mrs. Boone" had got the best of her in a trade, and that there was no good crying over split milk.

The Taylor estate was left in Mammy's charge by Monroe Taylor, who at one time was a well-known water front character, having control over all the restaurants at the ferries and on the Oakland boats. The property consisted of land in East Oakland. Mammy agreed to trade with Mrs. Taylor for \$9000. The property was deeded, and at once sold by the old woman, but instead of the \$9000 Mrs. Taylor was put into a residence on Sutter street adjoining one of the Bell houses. Six months later she and her four children were turned out on the street by the real owner of the house, who knew nothing whatever of the paying him the rent. Mrs. Pleasant persuaded Mrs. Taylor that her actions in the matter had been perfectly honest, but that Mrs. Bell was demented and that the poor creature was responsible for the whole business, although she had not meant any harm by it.

All of the above mentioned estates were left by colored residents of this city.

Mammy is not a wanderer. "My proverb is," she says, "that a rolling stone gathers no moss. It is better to be a bump on a log, anyway, even if you do get creditors to bring insolvency proceedings against you. I will be here and alive, honey, when all them creditors is dead and gone."

Since her eviction from the Bell mansion at the corner of Octavia and Bush streets, that establishment has ceased to be "The House of Mystery." It has undergone a thorough renovation and complete change, and all of the members of the family have been reunited under its roof.

The photographs of Mammy Pleasant which illustrate this article are the first for which she has ever sat and are,

