

Heroes in Black Skins

Heroes in Black Skins

Some years ago, when visiting a little town in western Ohio, I found a colored man who made an impression upon me which I shall never forget. This man's name was Matthews. When I saw him he was about sixty years of age. In early life he had been a slave in Virginia.

As a slave Matthews had learned the trade of a carpenter, and his master, seeing that his slave could earn more money for him by taking contracts in various parts of the county in which he lived, permitted him to go about to do so. Matthews, however, soon began to reason, and naturally reached the conclusion that if he could earn money for his master, he could earn it for himself.

So, in 1858, or about that time, he proposed to his master that he would pay fifteen hundred dollars for himself, a certain amount to be paid in cash, and the remainder in yearly instalments. Such a bargain as this was not uncommon in Virginia then. The master, having implicit confidence in the slave, permitted him, after this contract was made, to seek work wherever he could secure the most pay. The result was that Matthews secured a contract for the erection of a building in the State of Ohio.

While the colored man was at work in Ohio the Union armies were declared victorious, the Civil War ended, and freedom came to him, as it did to four million other slaves.

When he was declared a free man by Abraham Lincoln's proclamation, Matthews still owed his former master, according to his ante-bellum contract, three hundred dollars. As Mr. Matthews told the story to me, he said that he was perfectly well aware that by Lincoln's proclamation he was released from all legal obligations, and that in the eyes of nine tenths of the world he was released from all moral obligations to pay his former master a single cent of the unpaid balance. But he said that he wanted to begin his life of freedom with a clean conscience. In order to do this, he walked from his home in Ohio, a distance of three hundred miles, much of the way over the mountains, and placed in his former master's hand every cent of the money that he had promised years before to pay him for his freedom.

Who will be brave enough to say that such a man is not fit to use the ballot, is not fit for citizenship?

SERGEANT WILLIAM H. CARNEY

DURING the Civil War in the course of the operations before the city of Charleston, South Carolina, it was decided to concentrate all the available forces of the Federal army on Fort Wagner on Morris Island, in order to bombard the fort, and then to charge it.

After an exhausting march, and without the troops having had time for food, the bombardment began. The line of battle was formed with the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts assigned to the post of honor and danger, in front of the attacking column.

Suddenly such a terrific fire was opened on the regiment when ascending the wall of the fort with full ranks that, using the words of Sergeant Carney, "they melted away almost instantly" before the enemy's fire.

During the attack, Colonel Robert G. Shaw, commanding the brigade, was killed. So disastrous was the fire that the brigade was compelled to retire; but Sergeant Carney, who was with the battalion in the lead of the storming column, and who, with the regimental colors, had pressed forward near the colonel leading the men over the ditch, planted the flag upon the parapet, and, lying down in order to get as much shelter as possible, for half an hour, until the second brigade came up, kept the colors up all the time. He received a severe wound in the head. When this brigade retired, he, creeping on his

knees, having by this time received a wound in the thigh also, followed them, but still holding up the flag. Thus he held the flag over the wall of Fort Wagner during the conflict of two brigades, and received two wounds.

When he entered the field hospital where his wounded comrades were, they cheered him and the colors. Nearly exhausted from the loss of blood, he exclaimed: "Boys, the old flag never touched the ground!"

RUFUS

RECENTLY a colored man who lives not many miles from the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, in Alabama, found that when he had harvested his cotton and paid all his debts he had about one hundred dollars remaining. This negro is now about sixty-five years of age, and of course spent a large portion of his early life in slavery. So far as book-learning is concerned, he is ignorant. Notwithstanding this, I have met few persons in all my acquaintance with whom I always feel that I can spend half an hour more profitably than with this seemingly uneducated member of my race. In his own community this man is known simply by the name of "Rufus."

On many occasions Rufus has talked with me about the need of education for young people. This subject seems to be continually in his thoughts.

After Rufus had harvested his crop, as I have said, and evidently had thought the matter over carefully, he appeared at my office one afternoon. As he entered I saw at a glance that he had something unusually weighty upon his mind, and I feared that there had been some misfortune in his family. He wore his usual rough garb of a farmer, and there were no frills in evidence about him. On that day he was simply himself -just plain Rufus, as he always is.

After considerable hesitation he came to the matter about which he wished to consult me. He asked if I would be willing to accept a small gift from him, to be used toward the education of one of our boys or girls. I told him that I should be delighted to accept the gift, if he felt that he could part with any of his hard-earned dollars. After searching in his rough garments for a little time, he finally produced from some hidden part of his clothes a rag around which a white cotton string was carefully tied. Unfastening the string slowly and with trembling fingers, he produced a ten-dollar bill, which he begged me to accept as his gift toward the education of some black boy or girl.

I have had the privilege of receiving many gifts for the Tuskegee Institute, but rarely one that has touched my heart and surprised me as this one did.

In a few minutes after having made his offering, Rufus left me and went to his home. The next day he sought out the principal of a white school in his own town, and after going through much the same performance as with me, placed a second ten-dollar bill in the hands of this white teacher, and begged him to use it toward the education of a white boy or girl.

ROBERT SMALLS

IN 1835 there was born a slave-child in Beaufort, South Carolina, who was named Robert, and who, later in life, was known as Robert Smalls.

In 1851 the owner of this young man moved to Charleston, and took Robert with him. In Charleston the slave was put to work as a "rigger," and soon became acquainted with all matters pertaining to ships. In 1861 Smalls was put to work at some menial service on a Confederate steamboat named the *Planter*. This steamer was used as a despatch-boat by General

Ripley, the Confederate commander at Charleston.

After Smalls had been upon the *Planter* long enough to become thoroughly acquainted with her, he planned and decided to undertake a bold and dangerous venture. Notwithstanding the fact that he was employed upon a vessel which was in the service of the Confederates, his sympathies were with the Union forces. In some way he had learned that these forces would be greatly strengthened if they could obtain possession of the *Planter*. Difficult as it would be to do this, he determined to try to put the boat into their hands.

After considering the matter carefully, -he was afraid to advise with any one, -Smalls decided upon a very bold plan. In the middle of the night he seized the vessel, took command, compelled all those on board to obey his orders, and then piloted the boat, still in the hands of the Confederates, to where he could turn it over to one of the Federal gunboats then blockading the port of Charleston.

It was estimated that the cargo of the *Planter*, including guns, ammunition, and other material, was worth between sixty and seventy thousand dollars. Of course this feat of Smalls created a sensation at the time. He was given a position of honor and trust on board the *Planter*, and also was rewarded with money. In many ways Smalls proved himself to be of great value to the Union forces. He knew where the Confederate torpedoes were sunk in the harbor, for he had helped to sink many of them; hence he was able to assist the Federal forces to avoid these dangers.

In 1863, while the *Planter* was sailing through Folly Island Creek under command of Captain Nickerson, the Confederate batteries at Secessionville opened such a hot fire on her that the captain deserted his post and took shelter in the coal-bunker. Smalls, seeing this, entered the pilot-house, took command of the boat, and carried her safely out of reach of the enemy's guns. For this bravery General Gillmore promoted Smalls to be captain of the *Planter*, where he served till the end of the struggle between North and South caused his boat to be put out of commission and sold.

After the war Smalls was elected to membership in Congress at least three times, and also served in many places of trust in South Carolina. General Smalls, as he is now known, still lives in Beaufort, South Carolina, where he enjoys the confidence and respect of the people of both races.

THE GENERAL'S LAST DOLLAR

VERY soon after the close of the Civil War some Union generals were given a dinner by a famous Confederate general in Petersburg, Virginia. The guests were waited upon by a colored man, one of the old type of servants, who was passionately devoted to the Confederate general, who had been his owner for many years.

None of the Union officers realized the fact that General G ---, their host, had been stripped of all his property by the war. Indeed, there was little in his fine, courtly bearing, or in the dinner, to apprise them of this fact.

The meal was served by Uncle Zeke, the old colored servant, with all the neatness and formality that had characterized such functions in the more prosperous days of the late slave's owner. When the meal was over, for some unexplained reason the Northern guests forgot, or neglected to remember, Uncle Zeke.

Not so with General G ---. He took the only piece of money in his possession, a one-dollar bill, and with great politeness handed it to Uncle Zeke, who bowed and thanked him for it in the most approved manner.

But as soon as the guests were gone, and the old colored servant could speak with General G --alone and unobserved, he came to him and said: "Massa, I was powerful glad to see you make dat front before dem Yanks, an' teach dem a lesson; but, massa, I knows dat is de las' dollar you's got, an' I can't keep it. I want you to take it an' git Miss Genie a new dress, 'cause she ain't had no new dress dis year."

MOSES TURNER

DURING the closing days of the Civil War a great many of the slaves in Virginia followed the Northern army as it went through the State from time to time, and thus made themselves free before the Emancipation

Proclamation was issued. It was comparatively easy at this time for almost any slave to find his way from northern Virginia into a free State.

At the opening of the war there was a white family named Turner that was very prominent in that part of Virginia. In this family there were four sons, four daughters, and their mother. In the first battles of the war two of the sons were killed, and, later on, the third son was slain. Not long before the close of the war the fourth son came home on a furlough. He found his mother and sisters in destitute circumstances. They had no sugar and coffee, and the clothes that they had been able to secure were few. The war had reduced the family to a point where it had none of the comforts and few of the necessities of life.

But for the faithful labor of the dozen or more slaves on the place, there would have been great suffering.

Among the slaves there was one man, just past middle age, called Moses, who was looked up to by the others as a leader. To him had been intrusted the management of the farm.

Before the young master left home at the end of his last furlough, he had a long and earnest talk with Moses, in which he told him that he was going to trust not only the management of the farm to him, but was going to place in his care the safety of the young man's mother and sisters and the valuables in the house and about the place. Moses promised that he would not betray the trust.

A few weeks after the return of the young master to the army, a division of the Northern army came through that region. Some days before the arrival of this force, Moses had word of its possible coming through the agency of that rather mysterious means of communication known among the slaves as the "grape-vine telegraph."

Fearing that there might be those among the Yankees who would be bent upon mischief, Moses decided, after consulting with his mistress, to take all the old silver and valuable household articles to a near-by swamp and bury them. This he did in the night, and no one knew the hiding-place of these articles but himself.

In the early morning, a few days later, several companies from a Northern regiment passed the house. Some of the men got into conversation with Moses, and it did not take them long to discover that he was an exceptional man. After questioning him and getting some idea of his history, of their own accord they proposed that they release him from slavery and take him with them or send him North. Moses had no family or relatives, and nothing to bind him to the Virginia plantation.

There was no slave in all the South who had more earnestly longed for freedom than he had, and now the moment had come when he could obtain that for which he had so long wished. I have said that he had nothing to bind him to the Virginia plantation and to slavery. Yes, there was one thing: Moses had given his word to his master that he would protect and support the white people on the plantation during his master's absence, and no promise of freedom could make him break his word.

In the afternoon of the same day another group of straggling Northern soldiers came past the house. Before they reached it they had heard interesting stories of the wealth of the owners of Moses, especially their wealth in old silver plate and similar articles. Some of the more villainous of the soldiers resolved to possess themselves of as much of this silver as possible. When they approached the house they were met by Moses, who informed them politely that the male members of the family were away, and that he was in charge. Without any great amount of hesitation the soldiers told him what they wanted. The slave civilly but firmly gave his hearers to understand that although he knew

where the valuables of the family were, it was a secret which he would share with no one. The soldiers at first tried to bribe him with money, and then, when that had no effect, with the offer of freedom, but with the same result. Then they tried to frighten him by threats of bodily harm, but he was not moved.

As a last resort, a rope was procured and he was strung up by his thumbs, but to no purpose. This terrible torture was repeated twice, and then half a dozen times. The slave was finally in such a condition of collapse by reason of this torture that he could scarcely stand

WILL PHILIP LINING

"How He Saved St. Michael's" is an old, old poem, and the church which the negro slave saved from destruction is said to have been St. Philip's instead of St. Michael's, but the deed was such a brave one that the story of it has lived for a century, and will continue to live.

Something like a hundred years ago a great fire was raging furiously in the city of Charleston, South Carolina. Building after building had been destroyed, and a gale of wind carried sparks far and wide to spread the conflagration. The lofty spire of St. Philip's Episcopal Church caught fire almost two hundred feet above the ground, and in an apparently inaccessible place, and the people in the streets below saw with dismay that one of their city's dearest possessions seemed about to be lost to them. Some stanzas from the old poem tell the rest of the story best:

Who is it leans from the belfry, with face up-turned to the sky,
Clings to a column and measures the dizzy spire with his eye?
Will he dare it, the hero undaunted, that terrible sickening height?
Or will the hot blood of his courage freeze in his veins at the sight?
But see! he has stepped to the railing; he climbs with his feet and his hands,
And firm on a narrow projection, with the belfry beneath him, he stands;
Now once, and once only, they cheer him -a single tempestuous breath -
And there falls on the multitude gazing a hush like the stillness of death.
Slow, steadily mounting, unheeding aught save the goal of the fire,
Still higher and higher, an atom, he moves on the face of the spire.
He stops! Will he fall? Lo! for answer, a gleam like a meteor's track,
And, hurled on the stones of the pavement, the red brand lies shattered and black.
Once more the shouts of the people have rent the quivering air;
At the church door, vestry, and people wait with their feet on the stair;
And the eager throng behind them press for a touch of his hand -
The unknown saviour, whose daring could compass a deed so grand.
But why does a sudden tremor seize on them while they gaze?
And what means that stifled murmur of wonder and amaze?
He stands in the gate of the temple he had periled his life to save;
And the face of the hero before them is the sable face of a slave.

History tells that the slave was promptly given his freedom as a reward for what he had done, and that in after life this man was known by the name of Will Philip Lining.

"RUBE" LEE

AT the Alabama Constitutional Convention held recently in Montgomery, a member made an attack on the negro race as a whole, charging that it was unreliable, untruthful, insolent, indolent, and entirely wanting in the elements of manhood and womanhood.

An old Montgomery negro named Reuben Lee heard the wholesale charges, and, as the recollections of his slave days came back to him, talked feelingly of the past.

In a trembling voice Mr. Lee told several members of the Constitutional Convention incidents of the dark days during the Civil War. "I cannot believe," said he, "that the younger white men, like the speaker, really understand and know my people, else they would not make such statements about them. I wish he could know something of the relations that existed between master and slave. I remember one night, soon after the war began, my old master had some fresh mutton that had been killed that day, and old mistress wanted their daughter, who lived about three miles away, to have some of it.

"Master said it would be a good thing for her to have some of the mutton if there was any one by whom they could send it. 'Why not send Rube?' said the mistress, and the old man agreed that I should go. When they told me what they wanted, I objected, telling them I was too tired from work in the field that day. They told me

I might ride the old horse, and so I took a leg of mutton and rode over to my young mistress's house.

"When I reached the house and the young woman found out who I was, she rushed to the door to meet me, exclaiming: 'Oh, Rube, I am so glad to see you! I haven't slept any for several nights. [illustration omitted] My husband and brothers have all gone to the war, and I have been so scared, back here by myself with my two little children, that I could not sleep. You must stay all night, so I can get a little sleep.' I told her that her father and mother were expecting me back that night, but she pleaded so earnestly with me to stay that I could not refuse. Wrapping myself up in some quilts which she gave me, and with my head resting on an old washboard, I remained all night under a hickory-tree at the gate of my young mistress's house. Next morning, with tears in her eyes, she thanked me for staying there and protecting her and her two little children, and said that although there was no house or any other living soul within a distance of two miles, she felt safe while I was there, and that she had not slept so well for more than a week. So, for many months after that, I watched first at her house, sleeping under the hickory-tree, and then at my old master's. Perhaps if those who attack my race knew of such incidents as these, which were constantly happening then, and which happen even now, they would not seek to incite such intense feelings of race hatred."



24-bit color image of a bronze (?) bust of Booker T. Washington. Bust is photographed (from onlooker's perspective) front left.