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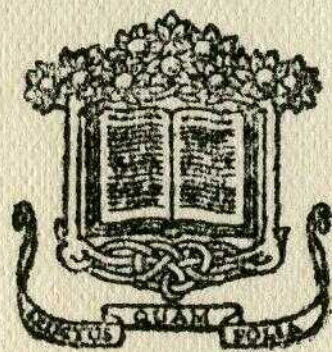
# The Story of the Negro

## The Rise of the Race from Slavery

By

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## CHAPTER I

### FIRST NOTIONS OF AFRICA

SOME years ago, in a book called "Up From Slavery," I tried to tell the story of my own life. While I was at work upon that book the thought frequently occurred to me that nearly all that I was writing about myself might just as well have been written of hundreds of others, who began their life, as I did mine, in slavery. The difficulties I had experienced and the opportunities I had discovered, all that I had learned, felt and done, others likewise had experienced and others had done. In short, it seemed to me, that what I had put into the book, "Up From Slavery," was, in a very definite way, an epitome of the history of my race, at least in the early stages of its awakening and in the evolution through which it is now passing.

This thought suggested another, and I asked myself why it would not be possible to sketch the history of the Negro people in America in much the same way that I had tried to write the story of my



own life, telling mostly the things that I knew of my own personal knowledge or through my acquaintance with persons and events, and adding to that what I have been able to learn from tradition and from books. In a certain way the second book, if I were able to carry out my design, might be regarded as the sequel of the first, telling the story of a struggle through two and one-half centuries of slavery, and during a period of something more than forty years of freedom, which had elsewhere been condensed into the limits of a single lifetime. This is, then, the task which I have set myself in the pages which follow.

There comes a time, I imagine, in the life of every boy and every girl, no matter to what race they belong, when they feel a desire to learn something about their ancestors; to know where and how they lived, what they suffered and what they achieved, how they dressed, what religion they professed and what position they occupied in the larger world about them. The girl who grows up in the slums of a large city, the Indian out in the wide prairie, the "poor white" boy in the mountains of the Southern states, and the ignorant Negro boy on a Southern plantation, no matter how obscure their origin, each will feel a special interest in the people whose fortunes he or she has shared, and a special sympathy with all that people have lived, and suffered and achieved.



The desire to know something of the country from which my race sprang and of the history of my mother and her people came to me when I was still a child. I can remember, as a slave, hearing snatches of conversation from the people at the "Big House" from which I learned that the great white race in America had come from a distant country, from which the white people and their forefathers had travelled in ships across a great water, called the ocean. As I grew older I used to hear them talk with pride about the history of their people, of the discovery of America, and of the struggles and heroism of the early days when they, or their ancestors, were fighting the Indians and settling up the country. All this helped to increase, as time went on, my desire to know what was back of me, where I came from, and what, if anything, there was in the life of my people in Africa and America to which I might point with pride and think about with satisfaction.

My curiosity in regard to the origin and history of the dark-skinned people to which I belong, led me at first to listen and observe and then, later, as I got some schooling and a wider knowledge of the world, to inquire and read. What I learned in this way only served, however, to increase my desire to go farther and deeper into the life of my people, and to find out for myself what they had been in Africa as well as in America.

What I was first able to hear and to learn did not,



I confess, take me very far or give me very much satisfaction. In the part of the country in which I lived there were very few of my people who pretended to know very much about Africa. I learned, however, that my mother's people had come, like the white people, from across the water, but from a more distant and more mysterious land, where people lived a different life from ours, had different customs and spoke a different language from that I had learned to speak. Of the long and terrible journey by which my ancestors came from their native home in Africa to take up their life again beside the white man and Indian in the New World, I used to hear many and sinister references, but not until I was a man did I meet any one, among my people who knew anything definite, either through personal knowledge or through tradition, of the country or the people from whom my people sprang. To most of the slaves the "middle passage," as the journey from the shore of Africa to the shore of America was called, was merely a tradition of a confused and bewildering experience, concerning whose horrors they had never heard any definite details. Nothing but the vaguest notions remained, at the time I was a boy, even among the older people in regard to the mother country of my race.

In slavery days the traditions of the people who lived in the cabins centred almost entirely about the lives and fortunes of the people who lived in the



"Big House." The favourite stories around the cabin fireside related to what this or that one had seen on some distant journey with "old master," or perhaps to the adventures they had when master and they were boys together.

It has often occurred to me that people who talk of removing the Negro from the Southern states and colonising him in some distant part of the world do not reflect how deeply he is rooted in the soil. In most that the white man has done on this continent, from the time Columbus landed at San Salvador until Peary penetrated farthest North, the Negro has been his constant companion and helper. Any one who considers what the Negro has done, for example, in the Southern states alone, in cutting down the forests, clearing the land, tilling the soil and building up the farms and the cities, will recognise that, directly and indirectly, his labour has been an enormous contribution to the civilisation of the Western world. Any one, on the other hand, who will listen to the songs that we sing, and the anecdotes that are told by the Negro and concerning him; any one who will read the literature and the history of the Southern states, will see that the Negro has contributed, not merely his labour, but something also of his inner life and temperament to the character and quality of the South.

Until freedom came the life of the Negro was so intimately interwoven with that of the white man



that it is almost true to say that he had no separate history. To the slave on the plantation the "Big House," where the master lived, was the centre of the only world he knew. It was after freedom came that the masses of the Negro people began to think of themselves as having a past or a future in any way separate and distinct from the white race. There were always some among them, like Frederick Douglass, who were different in this respect from the masses. They became the fugitive slaves.

After I began to go to school I had my first opportunity to learn from books something further and more definite about my race in Africa. I cannot say that I received very much encouragement or inspiration from what I learned in this way while I was in school. The books I read told me of a people who roamed naked through the forest like wild beasts, of a people without houses or laws, without chastity or morality, with no family life and fixed habits of industry.

It seems to me now, as I recall my first definite impressions of my race in Africa, that the books I read when I was a boy always put the pictures of Africa and African life in an unnecessarily cruel contrast with the pictures of the civilised and highly cultured Europeans and Americans. One picture I recall vividly was in the first geography I studied. It was the picture of George Washington placed side



by side with a naked African, having a ring in his nose and a dagger in his hand. Here, as elsewhere, in order to put the lofty position to which the white race has attained in sharper contrast with the lowly condition of a more primitive people, the best among the white people was contrasted with the worst among the black.

Naturally all this made a deep and painful impression upon me. At this time I had the feeling, which most of us are likely to have when we are young and inexperienced, that there must be something wrong with any person who was in any way, whether in dress or manners, markedly different from the persons and things to which I was accustomed. It seemed to me at that time a mark of degradation that people should go about with almost no clothes upon their backs. It did not occur to me that, possibly, the difference in the customs of wearing clothes in Africa and in America, and the difference in the feeling that people in Europe and in Africa have about clothes, was largely a matter of climate. It seemed to me that a human creature who would willingly go about with a ring in his nose must be a very fierce and terrible sort of human animal, but it never occurred to me to have any such feelings in regard to the persons whom I had seen wearing ornaments in their ears. In spite of all this, I still held fast to the notion that a race which could produce as good and gentle and loving a woman as



my mother must have some good in it that the geographers had failed to discover.

It is hard for one who is a member of another race and who has not had a like experience to appreciate the impression that has often been made upon me, and upon other members of my race as they have listened, as inexperienced boys and girls, to public speeches in which the whole Negro race was denounced in a reckless and wholesale manner, or as they have read newspapers and books in which the Negro race has been described as the lowest and most hopeless of God's creation. Sometimes, when I was a young man, I was driven almost to despair by the hard and bitter, and frequently, as it seemed to me, unjust statements about my race. It was difficult for me to reconcile the ruthless denunciations which men, with whom I was acquainted, would make in their public speeches, with the uniform courtesy and kindness which they had shown to me and others of my race in all their private relations. Even now it is difficult for me to understand why so many Southern white men will allow themselves, for the purpose of enforcing an argument or in the heat of a political discussion, to go so far in the denunciation of the Negro as to do injustice to their own better natures and to their actual feelings toward coloured people whom they meet, perhaps, in business, or toward the servants employed in their own household, the woman who cooks their food, looks after



their house and cares for their children. I mention these facts because they serve to illustrate the singular relations of interdependence and opposition in which the white and black people of the South stand to each other to-day, all of which has had and is having a very definite influence upon the development of my people in the South.

The hard and discouraging statements which I was compelled to hear in regard to my race when I was a boy, had, at different times, two very different effects upon me. At first they sometimes made me feel as if I wanted to go away to some distant part of the earth and bury myself where I might be a stranger to all my people, or at least where the thing that we call race prejudice did not exist in the way it does in the Southern states. Sometimes I thought of doing something desperate which would compel the world, in some way or other, to recognise what seemed to me the wrongs of my race. But afterward, and on second thought, the effect was to drive me closer to my own people, to make me sympathise with them more intimately and more deeply, to feel toward them as I did toward my own dear mother who had brought me into the world when she and they were slaves.

In the end there grew up within me, as a result of both these feelings, a determination to spend my life in helping and strengthening the people of my race, in order to prove to the world that whatever had



been its feelings for them in the past it should learn to respect them in the future, both for what they were and what they should be able to do. I made up my mind, also, that in the end the world must come to respect the Negro for just those virtues for which some people say he is despised, namely because of his patience, his kindness, and his lack of resentment toward those who do him wrong and injustice.

The feelings that divided my mind and confused my purposes when I was a young man, have also divided the members of my race. The continual adverse criticism has led some of us to disavow our racial identity, to seek rest and try our successes as members of another race than that to which we were born. It has led others of us to seek to get away as far as possible from association with our own race, and to keep as far away from Africa, from its history and from its traditions as it was possible for us to do.

My attention was first called to this disposition of members of certain section of my race to get away from themselves, so to speak; to be ashamed, in other words, of their history and traditions, when I found them bashful or lukewarm in regard to singing the old songs which are the peculiar and unique product of Negro life and civilisation in this country. I have heard musical critics, whose judgment the world respects, say that the old plantation hymns and songs were among the most original contributions that



America has made, not only to music but to any one of the so-called fine arts, and this not merely for their intrinsic charm and beauty but for their qualities, which make it possible for the trained musician to develop out of them more elaborate and refined musical forms, such as have been given to them recently by the Negro composer, Coleridge-Taylor. For myself, though it has been my privilege to hear some of the best music both in Europe and America, I would rather hear the jubilee or plantation songs of my race than the finest chorus from the works of Handel or any other of the great composers that I have heard. Besides, this music is the form in which the sorrows and aspirations of the Negro people, all that they suffered, loved, and hoped for, in short their whole spiritual life, found its first adequate and satisfying expression. For that reason, if for no other, it should be preserved.

What I have said here of my own feelings in regard to my race is representative of the feelings of thousands of others of the black people of this country. Adverse criticism has driven them to think deeper than they otherwise would about the problems which confront them as a race, to cling closer than they otherwise would have done to their own people, to value more highly than they once did, the songs and the records of their past life in slavery. The effect has been to give them, in short, that sort of race pride and race consciousness which, it seems



to me, they need to bring out and develop the best that is in them.

So it was that, thinking and studying about the origin and the destiny of my people, and of all of the forces that were working for and against them in my own country and elsewhere, the desire to know more about the history of my own people steadily increased and I tried, as well as I was able, to understand the Negro thoroughly, intimately, in those qualities in which, as a race, he is weak, as well as in those qualities in which he is strong.

This habit of observation and study of my own race, in the way I have described, led me to inquire into the personal histories of the men and women of my own race whom I have met in all parts of the United States. I sought to make myself acquainted with their difficulties and their successes, to understand their feelings and their habits of thought, to discover the inner drift and deeper currents of their lives; for any one who knows to any extent the character of the Negro people, knows that they have, just as other people, an outside and inside, and one cannot always tell what is going on deep down in their hearts merely from looking in their faces. Sometimes the Negro laughs when he is angry and cries when he is happy. Very often, has it seemed to me, the Negro himself does not know or fully understand what is going on in the depth of his own mind and heart.



Perhaps it will not be out of place for me to say here, at the beginning of this book, that the more I have studied the masses of the race to which I belong, the more I have learned not only to sympathise but to respect them. I am proud and happy to be identified with their struggle for a higher and better life.

Now and then I have read or heard it said that, in consequence of the inconveniences, the hardships and the injustices that members of my race frequently suffer, because of the colour of their skins, there was something exceptional and tragic about the situation of the Negro in America, "the tragedy of colour," as one writer has called it. No doubt there is much that is exceptional in the situation of the Negro, not only in America, but in Africa. No one is more willing than I to admit this to be true. But hardships and even injustice, when they concern the relations of people who are divided by creed, by class, or by race, are not exceptional. On the contrary, they are common, and every race that has struggled up from a lower to a higher civilisation has had to face these things. They have been part of its education. Neither is there, as far as my experience goes, anything peculiarly tragic connected with the life of the Negro, except in the situation of those members of my race who, for one reason or another, have yielded to the temptation to make a secret of their lowly birth and appear before the world as



something other than they are. Every coloured man knows, or has heard, of such cases, and in the whole history of the Negro race there are few sadder stories than some of these lives. I should say it was only when an individual suffers from his own folly, rather than the mistakes of others, that he is likely to become the hero of a tragedy. This is just as true of a race. The Negro race has suffered much because of conditions for which others were responsible. As a rule Negroes have had very little chance thus far, to make mistakes of their own. We have not been free long enough. While the world hears a great deal about "the tragedy of colour" and other phrases of the so-called Negro problem, I have observed that the world hears little, and knows, perhaps, less about the Negro himself. This is true of white people but it is also true of coloured people.

Some time ago, I had the privilege of meeting at Cambridge, Mass., a group of about twenty-five young coloured men who were studying at Harvard University. I found that most of these young men had a high standing in the University, were respected by their professors and, upon inquiring in regard to the subjects of their studies, I learned that several of them had taken extended courses in history. They seemed to know in detail, the story of Greek and Roman and English civilisations, and prided themselves upon their knowledge of the languages and history of the French and German peoples. They



knew a great deal about the local history of New England and were perfectly familiar with the story of Plymouth Rock and the settlement of Jamestown, and of all that concerned the white man's civilisation both in America and out of America. But I found that through their entire course of training, neither in the public schools, nor in the fitting schools, nor in Harvard, had any of them had an opportunity to study the history of their own race. In regard to the people with which they themselves were most closely identified, they were more ignorant than they were in regard to the history of the Germans, the French, or the English. It occurred to me that this should not be so. The Negro boy and girl should have an opportunity to learn something in school about his own race. The Negro boy should study Negro history just as the Japanese boy studies Japanese history and the German boy studies German history.

Let me add that my knowledge of the Negro has led me to believe that there is much in the story of his struggle, if one were able to tell it as it deserves to be told, that it is likely to be both instructive and helpful, not merely to the black man but also to the white man with whom he is now almost everywhere, in Africa as well as America, so closely associated. In the last analysis I suppose this is the best excuse I can give for undertaking to tell "The Story of the Negro."