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[My Negro Friends]

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FOLKLORE

MY NEGRO FRIENDS

“The first Negro I remember was Maum Sarah Grice. She and her husband lived in a house in the yard and bossed everything. Tall, slender, dignified, she had the love and respect of us all.

“Maum Mary Brady comes next. She was the one who brought the babies. Sometimes the doctor helped her. Sometimes his horse was slow or he was away from home and would 'be lated'. Maum Mary was neither black nor red nor white but a blending of all three. What she didn't know wasn't worth knowing. She would arrive and, taking immediate charge of everything, bundle us all into a carriage from the 'livery stable' and send us to a country cousin for the day. (This meant for us in the fall an overdose of scuppernongs; in the spring black-berry stains and pains.) On our return Maum Mary would permit us,

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one by one to tippy-toe into a dark, dark room where our mother drank sweetened tea and nibbled soda crackers. She would pull blankets down and show us the 'little man' she had found in a hollow stump or brought on a billy goat. From the beginning I sensed that Maum Mary had good blood from back there somewhere. She was a perfect lady. We gave her obedience and respect and love.

“Minnie McCoy was not like any of the rest. Big-boned and black, she could and would attempt any task. At night around the fire she charmed and terrified us with her tales of hags and hants. She made climbing the stairway 2 at Grandma's old house in the dark an adventure. At night when the only box of matches was up-stairs and Mama would ask, 'Who will get Mama the matches?' it took courage to volunteer — the courage of a real soldier. Coming back down was the worst part. One always sang 'He will go with me all the way!' or some other good song to keep one's courage up. And one walked slowly. The 'THING' must not suspect one was afraid! If one SHOWED fear one was half-gone already! There was always a big hand spread wide behind one ready to grab if one moved too fast[?] 'Mama's smart little girl!' was my reward and the wondering looks of the more imaginative who marveled at sister's courage! Minnie believed in the hags and hants she told about and we had 'Jack the Giant Killer' and Grimm's Fairy tales so our dark was peopled with grotesque figures of many imaginations.

“Uncle Power (really 'Uncle Powell Woodberry') was another member of the family of colored friends we grew up with. On his cane he moved along the streets of Marion with the respect and affection of black and white. When we drew near he would begin blessing us. Always to the girls:

“Be the good Mary! Grow up, live forever to die no more!

“And to the boys he'd say:

“Be the good Moses! Live forever to die no more!

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“Then, warming up, the old man would begin to 'Shout old Satan's kingdom down! It must come down! It must come down!' While we stood wide-eyed and 3 charmed. Uncle Power like Maum Mary showed his white and Indian blood.

“Uncle Isaac Smith always drove the two mules hitched to the covered wagon that took us gypsying for vacation to the sea-shore. Way back there in 1896 it took us two days to travel the sandy, winding road we travel now in less than two hours. We'd leave home early while the stars were shining and Uncle Isaac cooked breakfast over a campfire. There was cold boiled ham and fresh eggs bought for ten cents a dozen from the nearest farm house. And Uncle Isaac would cook four quarts of hominy in a two quart pot. He did many other things as magic. Bustling around the back yard searching for a lost hoe he'd tell us:

“‘Make haste, chillun! Find that hoe! I'm goin' to regulate this gol-fired premises!’ And we thought he did.

“Every day we'd go out with the tide and fish all the way home. The boat was called the 'KINGFISHER' and the creek boy, John Knox, (aged nine or ten or eleven or twelve) handled the six foot oars in front. Behind him Uncle Isaac clumsily but effectively pulled on the eight foot pair. He/ was accepted as Captain and gave us orders constantly to 'Trim the boat!' and he kept telling John 'Keep stroke boy! Keep stroke! Usually we'd burst into song and then they always 'kept stroke'. 'Pull for the shore, sailor!' was a favorite when we started home at sunset. John Knox, a genuine artist, caught innumerable 'leetle fish on WAN leetle hook!' and 4 Uncle Isaac kept telling us how to put a shrimp on the hook and chewed tobacco steadily. Dangling his line over the edge of the boat he always spit on his hook for luck. We believed so firmly in his trick that we'd beg him to 'spit on our hooks too!'

“Uncle Isaac has gone now to his mansion prepared for him by the angels but always when the trout won't bite I find myself wishing for him and his magic tobacco juice.

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“Then there was Aunt Kit. Born on our Great-grand-father's plantation way before the war, she nursed our mother during the war. Born in slavery she found it good and choose to remain in it till her death. She felt that slavery was good or bad as the 'Master' was good or bad. So she never left my Grand-mother who she recognized as her best friend. 'Miss Laura' as she called her was absolutely dependent on Kit; what would Kit have done without her white friend! They were like twin hickory trees that grow up side by side. When the wind came from the west one did the bracing: with the easterly wind the burden fell on the other. Together they salvaged ham bones left scattered by Sherman's army which stripped smoke-house and barn. They (with the help of some sympathetic Yankee soldiers — who had left wives and babies back where they came from) shucked and shelled corn together bringing bushels into the house. And having faced life and death together, they were friends to the end. When her 5 time came to go, the doctor spoke to see whether she were conscious. No response. Her beloved Beck, her daughter, called her name. No answer. “Miss Laura' asked, “Kit, do you know Jesus?’

“Jesus, my all in all!’ She breathed.

“Kit spoke no more. On the marble slab she erected my Grand-mother put her name, Kit Cook and the three words 'Faithful Unto Death!’

“Lillie came to us at the age of nine. She stuck, somehow. Over a quarter of a century of faithful service. If she goes first could I write a more fitting epitaph?

“Our Negro friends have always been trusting — like little children. Grateful for small things, generous and loving. Except ye become as little children ——— How could one betray a little child?”