VARIOUS

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THE JUBILEE SINGERS

One of the most interesting and vivid of our recollections is that of witnessing some scenes in negro slavery in the United States, now upwards of twenty years ago – very nearly the close of the iniquity; but of that nobody was aware. There was a novelty in seeing fairly dressed men and women brought out for sale by public auction, and in observing how the persons who came to buy carefully examined the men's hands and the flexibility of their fingers, looked into their mouths to make sure of their teeth, and having effected a removal of the coats and shirts, scanned the bare backs to discover whether they had suffered by the lash. Just as in buying horses in a market, it was quite a business affair; and what was a little surprising, the unfortunate objects of this degrading exhibition took all in good part. But

what else could they do? In the grasp of power, they knew that resistance was worse than useless. Close by were cow-hide whips handled by heartless ruffians voraciously chewing tobacco, as if to keep up the proper inspiration of brutality. Across the way was seen an ugly brick building inscribed with the word Jail, in tall black letters on a white ground, to which establishment, in case of remonstrance, the poor wretches would have been instantly marched for punishment. Doom hopeless!

The equanimity, and indeed the good-humour, with which these blacks seemed to endure their fate, indicated, we thought, good points of character. Nowhere in travelling about did we observe anything positively disagreeable, to remind us that the labourers in the fields or the loiterers at doorways were slaves. Often, we heard singing and jollity, as if light-heartedness was on the whole predominant. Obviously, slave-owners were not all Legrees. On the contrary, in many instances they shewed a kind indulgence to their 'servants,' as they called them, and were pleased to see them singing, laughing, and making merry in the intervals of rest from labour. Perhaps this is not saying much, for the singing of slaves may be compared to the notes of a bird in captivity, to be admired, but pitied. Anyway, there was a disposition to seek solacement in the outpouring of song. If not intellectually brilliant, the negro is naturally vivacious. Even when he grows old, he is still something of a boy, with an inherent love of frolic. He is clever in picking up tunes, and one of the complaints which we heard against him in a free state

was that if not looked after by his master, he would continually go out to entertainments and dance all night. A curious result of the taste for music has been the creation of what are known as negro melodies; partly suggested by old English airs, and by the psalm and hymn tunes that had been heard at church or in the devotional exercises of missionaries. With a blended simplicity and oddity, the negro airs which have gained currency are wonderfully harmonious and touching. The time is well marked, shewing correctness of ear, and accordingly the pieces, however eccentric in language, are well adapted for singing in harmony by a number of voices. From the performances of the 'Christy Minstrels,' as they are usually designated – white men with blackened faces imitative of negroes – people will have a pretty good idea of the melodies we speak of; but we should say that the real thing is to be obtained only from a band of genuine negroes, who for some years have been travelling about, and who style themselves the Jubilee Singers. Of these we want to say something.

As is well known, the abolition of slavery in the United States was no deliberate act of national justice and humanity, but took place in consequence of a proclamation issued by President Lincoln in the exigency of the civil war in 1862. Without preparation for freedom, over four millions of slaves were thrown on their own resources. They could work, but comparatively few of them could read; for it had been hitherto penal to teach them. Considering their state of ignorance, and the good grounds

they generally had for resenting past treatment, they behaved with a singular degree of moderation. What, however, was to be done with such a mass of illiterates, unaccustomed to self-reliance, and who, even if desirous of being taught, had no means of being so? Here comes in a bright feature of the Anglo-Saxon and Christian-minded North. Within six months of the close of the war, societies of benevolent individuals sprang up to extend the blessings of elementary education to hordes of negroes; and in which movement ladies appropriately took part. In the confusion and rankling animosities that prevailed in the South, the efforts to uplift the negro by means of schools were heroic, often dangerous, and always attended with difficulty. There was likewise much good done by the American Missionary Association. Schools, academies, and preaching stations were at length established in quarters where they were most needed. To complete the organisation of humanising influences, some thoughtful individuals struck out the idea of establishing a University for the higher education of the freed people, and training them to go forth as ministers and teachers, as well as leaders in various departments of civil life.

It was easier to conceive this brilliant idea than to bring it to a practical issue. Where was the money to come from to build a University, to equip it properly, and to pay for professors? There would even be a difficulty in finding a site, for few land-owners in a central situation would be willing to promote the elevation of the coloured races. The history of the way in which these

preliminary difficulties were overcome is about as interesting a narrative as we ever read. Immense spirit and ingenuity were developed in bringing the scheme into shape. Without saying what it was for, a suitable site was procured at the price of sixteen thousand dollars, near Nashville, the capital of Tennessee. There were already a few frame-buildings on the spot, which were employed to accommodate a school, as a beginning of the proposed educational operations. The institution was called the Fisk University, in honour of General Clinton B. Fisk, who had taken a warm interest in the undertaking. The establishment was opened in January 1866.

By-and-by the school, or we might say schools, throve. Thousands of negroes were taught by a band of eager teachers, some of whom only a short time before did not know one letter from another. There was an honest enthusiasm in the whole affair that brought with it the blessing of success. Again we are called on to note what good is often done by the quiet unprompted and unselfish energy of a single individual. About the time when the Fisk University was organised, there cast up a young man named White, who, looking about for a means of livelihood, took up the profession of teacher. He was the son of a village blacksmith in the state of New York, had fought in several battles during the war, and made himself useful in connection with the Freedman's Bureau at Nashville. He had a special taste for vocal music, with which he amused his leisure hours, and this accomplishment along with good business habits, made him very acceptable as a

coadjutor in the University. White started a singing class among the negroes, male and female, who came to get lessons in reading; and, pleased with their aptitude, he fell upon the bold plan of drilling them as a choir of singers, who should travel through the Northern cities in the hope of gathering money to help the University funds. Getting his band into trim, he set out with them on a musical excursion in October 1871, carrying with them the good wishes of all, from the Principal of the institution downwards.

In our own country, the getting up of a university, or even the enlargement of one, is ordinarily a serious affair. Unless some wealthy person has bequeathed money for the purpose, government is worried for grants, and the public are worried for subscriptions. Keeping proceedings of this kind in view, one can hardly fail to be amused with the novel and heroic notion entertained by a dozen simple-minded negroes in trying to collect fifty to a hundred thousand pounds for a University by mere dint of singing a few simple hymns, which illustrious dons of the musical profession would only laugh at. Yet, this is what was attempted. Led by White as general manager, and by Miss Wells, who took the oversight of the girls of the party, the negroes went on their way, poorly clothed, and with barely means to pay for a night's lodging. We observe by the history given of them, that they trusted a good deal to kind treatment from Congregational and other churches. They got the gratuitous use of chapels for their concerts, or what were termed

'praise services,' and when they became known, engagements freely poured in upon them. The sweetness of the voices, the accuracy of the execution, the precision of the time, and the wild simplicity of the words, astonished the audiences who listened to them; the wonder being of course augmented by the fact of their colour and the knowledge that only a few years ago these singers had been slaves. Although generally well received, they had at first numerous difficulties to encounter. The expense of travelling from town to town was considerable. To give a distinctive character to their enterprise, they assumed the name of Jubilee Singers, significant of their emancipation in 1862, as the year of negro jubilee!

Their first eminent successes were at New York, Boston, and in Connecticut. The good-will of the people took the shape not only of money contributions, but of articles to furnish their proposed University. A firm at Boston made them a present of a thousand dollar organ. The singing campaign of three months over the principal parts of the Northern states yielded, after paying all expenses, the sum of twenty thousand dollars. The company were received at the University with joy and thanksgiving – a prodigious triumph for White, the planner and conductor of the expedition.

Encouraged by this success, a second campaign followed, and the result was another sum of twenty thousand dollars, making forty thousand that had now been secured. In this expedition, the party encountered various caste prejudices. Halls were refused to

them; at some railway stations they were treated with indignity, and hotel-keepers declined to give them accommodation. At one hotel where the keeper received them, all the waiters deserted their posts, and the Jubilee Singers waited on themselves and blackened their own boots. These misadventures were taken with good-humour. Having so far done well within American territory, the party resolved to try their fortune in Great Britain, for which purpose they were favoured with letters of introduction likely to advance their enterprise. Curiously enough, cabin accommodation was refused to the party by one after another of the leading ocean steamship lines. At last they were received on board one of the Cunard steamers, and safely and agreeably landed in England.

The letters of introduction worked marvels. We are to contemplate the Jubilee Singers one May afternoon in 1873, at Willis's Rooms, giving a private concert to a select body of individuals, by invitation of the Earl of Shaftesbury and a Committee of the Freedman's Aid Society. There was a distinguished assemblage; the singers did their best, and all were delighted. The Duke and Duchess of Argyll were foremost in expressing a desire to promote the object of the party, and arranged for a visit of the singers to Argyll Lodge the next day. This visit to Argyll Lodge was a notable event. The Queen, who is always foremost in works of intelligent benevolence, graciously attended for a short time, and listened with manifest pleasure to the hymns which the singers had learned in bondage.

Her Majesty in departing, communicated through the Duke her thanks for the gratification she had received. These preliminary efforts insured to the Jubilee Singers a wide round of popularity. Hospitable invitations poured in upon them from persons of literary and political distinction. Among the most pleasurable of these invitations was one to breakfast from Mr Gladstone, then prime-minister, by whom they were cordially received. After breakfast, the singers entertained the company with their wonderful music. The intense feeling with which they sang *John Brown*, with the refrain —

> John Brown died that the slave might be free,

electrified the audience; and 'never,' said a spectator, 'shall I forget Mr Gladstone's rapt enthusiastic attention. His form was bent forward, his eyes were riveted; all the intellect and soul of his great nature seemed expressed in his countenance; and when they had finished, he kept saying: "Isn't it wonderful? I never heard anything like it!"'

After spending three months in London, the Jubilee Singers proceeded to give a round of concerts in the principal towns of England and Scotland; being everywhere well received by large and appreciative audiences. Financially, the excursion was eminently successful. Nearly ten thousand pounds had been raised for the Fisk University, besides special gifts for the purchase of philosophical apparatus, and donations of books for

the library. The money collected first and last by the singers now amounted to about twenty thousand pounds, which went a considerable way towards the building of the University, which assumed shape and was opened in 1875. To reinforce the funds, another visit to Great Britain was determined on. We cannot go into an account of this second visit; it is enough to say that the singers again made their appearance in all the principal towns of England and Scotland, and were able to take back the sum of ten thousand pounds; making in all as a result of their labours the sum of thirty thousand. Since this time, the party have made various excursions, always increasing the funds for the erection of college buildings; but of the exact particulars we have no account. One of the objects in view is to erect a building called the Livingstone Missionary Hall, designed, as we understand, for the special preparation of missionaries for Africa. The latest statement we see on the subject is that the Jubilee Singers have gone on a visit to Germany, to secure funds to complete this building and further equip the University for missionary work.

The vicissitudes of travelling at home and abroad during several years led to changes in the company of singers. When members were obliged to retire, others equally qualified took their place. At different times twenty-four persons in all have belonged to the company. All of them have been slaves or of slave parentage. Excepting a few mulattoes, all have been of a pure negro type; and their respective histories offer some interesting facts concerning the condition of people of colour

in the slave states up till the period of general emancipation. It is gratifying to know that the extraordinary change of life from privation and contumely to comfort and public respect has not uplifted the feelings, or materially altered the habits of the members of the corps. In their moral and religious obligations they have ever been irreproachable. We are told that none of them uses tobacco; and their English friends, whose hospitalities have been so abundant, are equally surprised, if not gratified, to find that they are inveterate abstainers from alcoholic liquors. Considering the temptations and buffetings of their early life, there is not a little to admire in the conduct as well as in the accomplishments of the several individuals composing the party. The energetic yet modest way they have acquitted themselves in the routine of the very peculiar duties imposed on them, is probably not often met with in parties of higher pretensions.

We have now in brief told the story of the Jubilee Singers, and it is more than ordinarily remarkable. A handful of freed negro slaves undertaking by voluntary efforts to collect funds wherewith to establish and support a University, having for its object the higher education of the coloured population in the United States. The enterprise has had no parallel. These negroes do not beg, nor do they trouble people for subscriptions. They only try to raise funds by the exercise of their talents in an honest line of industry, by communicating pleasure to countless audiences. Amidst the frauds and commercial rascalities of pompous pretenders that are becoming a scandal to the age,

the unselfish and noble endeavours of these humble melodists stand out in marked contrast, as something to applaud and to redeem human nature. The marvel of the enterprise has been its universal success. High and low are equally pleased. Professing no particular knowledge in music, but yielding to none in an ardent admiration of the simpler class of national ballads and songs, we have listened to the melodies of the Jubilee Singers with heartfelt delight. Whether with or without instrumental accompaniment, the melodies might be described as supplying a new relish. It has been remarked that the greater number of the pieces are in the same scale as that in which Scottish music is written, with the fourth and seventh tones omitted. This would only indicate the untutored nature of their origin, and the wonder is greater at the effects produced. Nothing is left for us to add but an advice to our readers. It is, to take the earliest opportunity to go and hear the Jubilee Singers.

W. C.

HELENA, LADY HARROGATE

CHAPTER II. – AT CARBERY CHASE

The horseman, at whose approach the interesting inmate of *The Traveller's Rest* had so abruptly withdrawn from the place of observation whence he was contemplating the Elizabethan front of Carbery Court, had scarcely recognised in the lounger smoking his pipe beneath the elm, the bronzed seafaring fellow whom he had frequently of late encountered. But as the man moved off with hasty step and an evident dislike to observation, the rider's eyes for a moment followed him.

'A queer customer that,' he said carelessly to himself. 'What is he, I wonder? If I saw that ugly face of his near Ashdown Park or Newmarket Heath, I'd lay a trifle that he was a racing tout; in London I would class him as a dog-dealer or dog-stealer, or possibly a sham smuggler, one of those gruff longshore-men who waylay you with their contraband cabbage-leaf *Trabucos*; but being here, I think he has more the look of a real one.'

Having said which, he rode on, in the quiet enjoyment of a cigar, towards the material of which it is unlikely that the leaf of any British vegetable had contributed; while no sound but the jingling of the bridle-rein and the tramp of the horse's feet

broke the silence. Overhead there soared aloft a living canopy of verdure, formed by the mighty trees, that seemed to throw, as it were, a succession of triumphal arches over the smooth carriage-road, flecked with broad bars of light and shadow. There were vistas here and there, opening out from between the massive trees, on which an artist's eye might have feasted, dells clothed with beech and birch trees, fairy glens through which trickled some brooklet fresh from its cradle among the ridges of Dartmoor, pools on which the water-lily floated, and around which the deer bent down their antlered heads to drink. But Jasper Denzil had little or no appreciation of the charms of a landscape, and as he rode on, the only comment which escaped him was evoked by the sight of the superb old house, its many windows glistening golden in the sloping sun, as though to challenge admiration.

'Tiresome old jail!' he said, tossing away the stump of his cigar. 'A nice place to be mewed up in, with the London season at high-pressure, is this! If it were mine to do as I liked with' – But the only son and heir of Sir Sykes Denzil did not definitely state the course that he should pursue were he undisputed proprietor of Carbery Chase.

Jasper, whose actual age may have been six or at the most seven and twenty, was one of those men of whom it is puzzling to say whether they look, for their years, very youthful or surprisingly old. He was below the middle height, and his smooth pale face seemed at first sight almost boyish; but the cold glance

of the small blue eyes, the firmness of the compressed lips, and the tell-tale lines that were faintly visible at the angles of both eyes and mouth, were not such as we associate with ingenuous youth.

Captain Denzil (Jasper had at an early age attained, thanks to the golden ladder by which the offspring of wealthy men were wont to climb, his captaincy in the light cavalry regiment to which he had till recently belonged) had proved himself an expensive son to Sir Sykes. His fair moustache, pallid face, and drawling accent were well known on race-courses, and quite familiar in those darkened rooms at fashionable clubs where the fickle goddess Chance is worshipped by card-players around their lamp-lit green tables, while it is honest daylight in the workaday world beyond.

He rode into the yard and dismounted; but instead of immediately entering the house, lingered to exchange a thoughtful word or two as to the signs of an incipient spavin in the off fore-leg of the fiery chestnut which he had been riding.

'Knew he wasn't sound of course, when I bought him,' remarked the captain, with calm philosophy. 'A friend's horse never is, especially when the friend is such an impulsive open-hearted fellow as Charley Granger. But he was cheap, and he has a turn of speed, and I've entered him for the Pebworth Steeplechase, and don't want to pay forfeit. So see to the bandages, Phillips, will you; and don't have him out, except for gentle exercise on the soft, this fortnight. We mustn't neglect that

leg.'

Jasper was not one of those who care for a horse, as some of us do, for the horse's own sake, and out of genuine love for the noblest of the dumb servants that do the bidding of mankind. But he did regard the genus *equus* as a very valuable instrument for gambling purposes, and as such to be tended with jealous care and helped, when convenient, to victory on the turf.

With a slow step and a careless indolent manner, Jasper Denzil crossed the paved yard, and entered by a side-door the mansion that must one day in the course of nature be his, but of which as a place of residence we have already heard him express an opinion the reverse of flattering. There was very little at Carbery Chase to amuse the captain, cut off from his usual sources of excitement and a temporary exile from London and its pleasures. It was sorry work this pottering business of picking up a few ten-pound bets on country courses, or winning paltry stakes by the aid of wretched platers. It was better than nothing no doubt; precisely as at Monaco we see the ruined millionaire, Spanish or Russian, eagerly playing for silver when his last rouleaux of louis-d'or have taken wing; but he felt that it was a sore degradation for one whose dash and coolness had won dubious compliments from very great personages.

Traversing a passage, Jasper presently crossed the great hall – full of costly marbles brought from Italy, in days when there were no manufacturers of the spurious antique – and opened the door of what was known as the morning-room, cheerful and bright

as a morning-room should be, and overlooking the rose-garden, then glorious in its glow and blush of tender colour.

Two ladies were the occupants of the room, both young and both pretty, though each of them had that likeness to Jasper (her only brother) which we so constantly trace in members of the same family. Lucy it is true was dark-haired and dark-eyed; while Blanche, the younger and taller of the two, was delicately – perhaps too delicately – fair of complexion, and had hair of the palest gold. Sir Sykes had been for several years a widower; and all the Denzil family, with the exception of the baronet himself, were now present in that room, through the French windows of which came stealing in the fresh scent of roses.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.