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UNDER THE COTTONWOOD

A Saga of Negro Life in Which the History, Traditions and Folklore of the Negro of the Last Century Are Vividly Portrayed.

By

Katheryn Campbell Graham

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UNDER THE COTTONWOOD

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KATHERYN CAMPBELL GRAHAM

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FIRST EDITION

Printed by Theo. Gaus' Sons, Inc., New York, N. Y.

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DEDICATED

TO

MY DARLING DAUGHTER

BENZELL

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CHAPTER I

WHEN NOTIFIED that the President of the United States had signed the Emancipation Proclamation, Jake Stearns, a slave for twenty-five years, was washing woolen socks for a battalion of Confederate soldiers.

Since the feet were as stiff as boards, he had made a red-hot fire under a big black iron wash kettle and dumped the socks into boiling water, seasoned with strong lye soap.

With a big wooden paddle, he stirred and stirred the contents until they disintegrated into small clumpy masses. When he saw this his short stocky frame shook violently and greasy sweat hurried down his round brown face, for he knew or imagined the consequences.

Just in time to relieve this unpardonable situation, a tall man with a sallow bearded face galloped up on a swift steed. With excitement in both his voice and eyes, he jumped from his saddle, waved both hands frantically over his small shaggy head and shouted, "All you blacks is free; we jes' got the news. Don't know what'll happen. We ain't got orders frum headquarters yit."

No sooner said than he swung himself back into the saddle, kicked the brindle steed furiously in the flanks and sped away to the next crowded camp.

Stunned by the sudden news, the score or more of black men that were cooking dried beans and corn bread, for fear of criticism, exchanged only furtive glances at odd moments. Many things ran through their puzzled minds, but before they were able to express their approbation, Uncle Neb, the oldest one among them, said advisedly, "Boys, be kerful; you ain't free yit. Don't make no sho'. Jes' let you' hearts jump; you be ca'm. We's been prayin' fuh dis thing fuh yers and it's hyer. Free, free, thank God O'mighty, free at last."

By this time, Jake, with his old hat under his arm, stood

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in the crowd, panting. He had scrambled up the steep incline, for he had seen the messenger and heard the news. Every muscle in his round face punched out and every tooth in his head was visible. Before the others were conscious of his presence he yelled, "So Ah'm uh man." These words thundered in their ears and the neighboring woods sent them rushing back to him. "Abe Lincoln said so an' it must be true. With an ol' fiddle an' two dollars in mah jeans, Ah'm free."

Very little dinner was eaten that day. Soldiers with worried looks on their already tired faces gathered in small groups and spoke reluctantly in low muffled tones. The black men moved nervously around. The only audible sound was the dishes that now and then fell from their unsteady fingers. Being in such a confused state of mind the submissive slaves washed some of the dishes several times.

At five o'clock a big husky fellow thrust his head in at the kitchen door; it was the captain. Every nerve in their bodies tightened. The rigid frown on his face caused them many apprehensions. He stood with his right forearm resting on his round hip and his fingers flitting at his back. With a deep bass voice he gave this injunction, "Boys, we're leaving tonight. Have all baggage packed and ready to move by nine."

"Yas suh! Cap'n," they answered in chorus.

The restless blacks snatched and grabbed the well worn baggage and pushed it into old army boxes. A foot often assisted in mashing the contents into corners. By a quarter of nine, all wagons were loaded and tense drivers sat in their seats.

No moon came out to guide them. The mules and horses pulled long and hard before reaching the main road. The squeaky old wagons, aided by the sound of pounding hoofs, grew monotonous, and by midnight every man and animal longed for rest.

It was a warm night for that time of year; the earth was as dry as powder. Some of the boys threw blankets on the hard ground and rolled up in them. Uncle Neb and Jake found a little mound fit for a bolster and rolled up together. They needed no one to lull them to sleep. Their heavy eyelids soon closed and they were at peace with the world; but the mules and horses, tied to near-by trees, snorted and stamped, making so much noise that Uncle Neb, harried by

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uncertainties, got up. Looking in the direction that the light was peering, he couldn't belive his eyes. They had camped in an old grave-yard. In his fright, he grabbed Jake by both shoulders and stood him on his feet. "Jake, wake up, boy; dese hosses and mules is been seein' ghoses all night. Ah knowed sump'n wuz wrong wid 'em. Look, boy, we'se in a graveyard. Hosses sees ghoses, jes' lak dey sees duh win'."

This confusion awoke those sleeping on the ground; seeing was believing.

While the teams were being harnessed, the groggy soldiers climbed into the big smelly wagons to finish their naps, and as the yellow sun crawled lazily behind the distant azured hills, the long procession moved on silently.

They travelled for several days before Jake or any of the cooks heard more news. They worked as if nothing had happened, but silent prayers were being sent up to their Maker.

A courier finally overtook them and delivered the vital message.

It was hard for Jake to think of separating from his Master Jim. When a lad of thirteen years, he had been given to him as a Christmas present. Jim had always been kind to him, yet the urge to be a man of his own mind had constantly haunted him. He wanted a wife and family and to be able to go to his own house at night, as he'd seen free men do.

After supper, he sat on an old tin lard can turned upside down, waiting for his master. He'd never been free but he knew he could work and take care of a family; he'd taken care of Master Jim and his horses a long time.

Some of the slaves threw brushwood on the bonfire, and through the flame Jake saw several men coming toward him. One he recognized as his Master Jim. He was a handsome silvery blond, raw-boned, nearly six feet tall and wore his cap low, just over his eyes; so he had to raise his head a little in order to see well.

"Where's Jake?," he inquired of the first slaves he encountered.

"Hyer Ah is Moster Jim." Jake rose and met him.

"You're all through with your work?"

"Yas suh, Ah is."

"You've heard the news, I'm sure. This seems to be

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our parting. You've been with me for years. I'm not going home, but I've made arrangements for you to go."

Jake had been staring at the ground all this time, but when Master Jim said he wasn't going home, Jake quickly raised his eyes; these words seemed to stab him.

"Whut you go do, Moster Jim? Yo' pappy will be lookin' fuh you."

"Yes, Jake, but my friend here and I are going to travel about for a few weeks. I don't know where."

"Ah know, Moster Jim," came the quick reply, "but you cain't go 'bout dat way. Duh Yankees is uvry whurs; dey still kin git yuh. Ah don't want tuh go home 'thout you. Whut will Ah tell yo' pappy?" Jake said pleadingly. "He's spectin' me tuh bring you back."

Master Jim had to smile, but as he spoke he patted Jake.

"Don't take it so hard, Jake; I'll soon be there and you can take care of me as you always have, and I'll pay you. There's a bunch of soldiers going your way early in the morning. I've arranged for them to carry you to Nashville. That's ten miles of home; you can walk the rest of the way. You've served me well, I only wish I had something to give you," Master Jim said somewhat pathetically.

Jake didn't want his master to have a feeling of remorse. He knew he had a kind master and that counted with him more than gold. The few times Master Jim and Jake had discussed freedom, Master Jim had expressed a desire to have something to give his most faithful and grateful servant when the time came, as he believed it surely would.

Master Jim fixed his eyes on the ground and held his unshaven bearded chin between his thumb and forefinger. Jake knew he was worried and tried hard to console him. Whenever he tried hard enough, he'd always been able to convince his master; but this time his most prized arguments seemed to fall short. The truth about the whole thing was that neither was prepared for the parting.

"Dat's all right; don't you worry 'bout dat. You'se nuver raised yo' han' tuh hit me one time, an' God will bless you. Very few kin say 'bout dey moster whut Ah kin. When you come home, Ah'll be dah an' will kere fuh you."

"Good bye, Jake. Get your things together."

"Good bye, Moster Jim. Ah'll sho' miss you."

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"We'll miss each other; look for me in a month or two."

Master Jim walked away. His slender straight form soon faded in the heavy darkness; but Jake, his faithful servant, nervously separated their belongings and stuffed his into an old knapsack, then stretched out on his pallet and dreamed of the many happy days he and his master had spent together driving through the country or visiting neighboring towns to enjoy the courtesy of friends and strangers.

During the long journey home with the discharged soldiers, he never spoke unless spoken to; his thoughts were wandering like a fleecy morning cloud.

When Jake Stearns stepped in the back door of his mother's cabin, it was the beginning of an early spring. In the green fields that extended for miles, he saw hundreds of slaves chopping cotton and each head was keeping time with the hoe as it danced in a rhythmic swing between the stalks.

New life was in evidence; the barns had been whitewashed, the flowers and trees were re-robing, the birds and chickens were singing noisily to their broods, and the new frisky colts and calves were exhibiting shiny colorful coats.

As he sat in a profitless frame of mind, gazing at and admiring the many changes on the old farm, the brass dinner bell, hanging high between two oak poles, rang. Immediately the big field seemed to be moving forward. The swarming throng ran to the ends of their unfinished rows, dropped the hoes, and made for their dingy cabins, from which the odor of cabbage, turnip-greens and cornbread was exuding.

At the sight of his mother and brothers, Jake stepped in the doorway with both hands bracing the narrow frame that held an old plank door and shouted, "Dair's uh man in duh house." Tossing their heads a little to the back and then to the side, they caught every word; instantly their bare feet were slapping the hard earth faster.

"It's Jake, it's brother Jake," cried out Zeke almost breathless. "Mammy, he's come, our oldest brother is come frum war."

With blubbered faces they sat, prisoners of hope, listening to the horrible description of the paralyzing fear of war. With inexpressive countenances, they stared into space.

"Yas, Ah'm hyer. Ah'm duh man in dis cabin. Abe Lincoln said so, an' it sho' is true. Moster Jim turnt me

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loose an' tole me good bye; he went travellin' wid uh fren', but will come home in uh munt uh two. Some say he's goin' tuh git married, but Ah got mah doubts. It wuz hard fuh me tuh leave Moster Jim, he's been so good tuh me. I'se drev his fine hosses frum town tuh town uh long time."

Jake took the old fiddle from the wall, eyed it as he put it gently in his lap, and continued, "I'se played dis ole fiddle at meny uh dance an' he give me duh money, an' Mammy, Ah brung hit nearly all tuh you. I'se free but Ah'll allus take kere uv Moster Jim. Ah got mah free papers; all duh work Ah do now Ah gits pay fuh it, yas indeed."

As a result of this unexpected situation, fear gripped the poor Negroes. They had talked of freedom as long as they could remember talking about anything, but now it was a bigger word than they could comprehend. What was its real meaning? How would the slave owners interpret it?

With her eyes fastened on "The Pride of the Family," Aunt Mamie wiped her wet face on the corner of her old blue cotton apron.

"Son, mah chile, is we free? We ain't heerd nothin' 'bout it, but ef you sez so, Ah knows we is, fuh you'se allus been uh truf-ful boy; Ah knowed dis wuz comin' by my feelin's but Ah couldn't tell when. Where's we goin' at?"

"Jes be ca'm, Mammy; dey all knows it but dey's jes goin' tuh make yawl work 'til dey have tuh let you go. We kin hire ourselfs tuh Mr. Stearns. You jes worry 'bout gittin' loose frum dese white fo'ks. Dat's uh big uhnuf job."

Whispered conversations were prevalent in every cabin. Struggling hearts beat with another rhythm. Slave owners were cognizant that the news had spread over every plantation, because the returned blacks had frequent opportunities to remind them.

Spring passed and nothing eventful happened; summer was in full sway when strained anxiety and bored patience were relieved by the long expected news.

Si Stearns, master of the plantation was a tall lanky man, six feet; his forehead was as a rigid as a rub-board and the splenetic frown that was stamped on his face caused everyone a little uneasiness. He was never peremptorily sure himself of his next move. With a quick step, a nervous and disdainful air, he entered each cabin and in a few well selected

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words, delivered reluctantly the pressing message. He had decided himself to move his family to Texas, and as he'd always found happy coöperative faces in Aunt Mamie's cabin, he asked them to go with him. To this request they consented gratefully.

This was a triumphant hour for the slaves. At first they were filled with ecstasy and bewilderment, but when they revived sufficiently, they cried, prayed, shouted, and gave thanks to their Maker for weeks.

Throughout the entire South, four million started on their perilous journey, homeless and without a cent, yet happy and always showing patience, a virtue that is characteristic of the Negro.

Some of Si Stearn's slaves hired themselves to him, but most of them left. Some hired to other planters, some camped in empty barns and others, being excited, took to the woods, not knowing where they were going or what to do. For weeks the woods were full of the homeless creatures that had gathered from near-by plantations. Some had only a little clothing and food that was given them by their masters. The timid ones had nothing; but a few who were thoughtful took whatever necessities they managed to escape with. They didn't consider it stealing but simply taking a few things that they'd help to earn.

In several places the woods caught on fire and caused many of them, as well as people living near, to fear for their safety.

It was May of the next year when the caravan started for the Lone Star State. Heavy rains had washed out most of the dirt roads and this made the journey long and strenuous. The agony of labor stole many pounds from both men and animals.

After reaching Texas, it took a month or more to find a good location. Land was a bit higher than they had expected it to be, either for renting or buying; however, Si Stearns bought a plantation of two hundred acres. Their crops were successful and the seasons began to slip by.

The third year of their freedom found Zeke married; their only sister, Chloe Ann, engaged; Tim big enough for a good field hand; and Jake had saved a little money and was desperately in love.

Their nearest neighbors, the Carters, had always lived in

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Texas. Old Luke Carter had taken a beautiful slave girl for a wife and had reared a large industrious family, three boys and six beautiful girls, of the Creole type. He was ever mindful of these girls; many nights he sat up with a shotgun across his lap to protect them. He owned a large plantation, but worked only enough of it to keep his family living comfortably.

Sunday afternoons, Jake was seen wearing his best and calling on Nancy, cream of the bunch, as he styled her. On his return one night he wanted to discuss the subject of marriage with his mother, but he got cold feet, and it was put off for weeks. One day, as she was sputtering round in the back yard stirring lye hominy in the family wash pot, gathering up eggs and whatnot, he thought this an opportune time. Sidling up to her with both hands in his front pockets and spasmodically jerking up his trousers, he mumbled; "Mammy, I'se worked hard, saved uh little money and now I'se thinkin' 'bout axin' Nancy tuh marry me. You knows Moster Jim learnt me how tuh read some. Ah knows Ah kin take kere uv uh wife. You kin live wid sister; Ah'll help you; dat is, ef Nancy haves me. Ah'll nuver fergit you, Mammy; Ah nuver have. Ole man Trimble is divided some land up an' is sellin' it to us cullord fo'ks. Ah'd lak mighty well tuh have some uv it."

With a broad smile stealing over her plump face, Aunt Mamie nodded in approval. "Yas son, I'se willin'. You is been uh good chile an' you'se plenty ole. Nancy is ez purty ez uh speckled pup and Ah'd lak mighty well tuh be her mammy too. Don't be shame; all gals wants tuh marry an' Nancy cain't find uh smarter husban'."

She stood akimbo, tossed her head to one side then quickly to the other, showed her pearly teeth as she continued, "You ain't bad lookin' yo-sef; you'se lak yo' mammy." Jake, displaying his ivories in response said, "Thanks, Mammy, Ah'm glad you'se pleased."

Light-hearted, he swaggered down the Ashford road to see old man Trimble. He felt he'd stand a better chance with Nancy if he were buying land. He found the old man branding cattle. Twisting his old hat almost in half and digging a hole in the ground with the toe of his right boot, Jake eyed the old man and said cautiously, "Mister Trimble, Ah

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