

'Jack Nazarene.'

A STORY OF THE NEW SOUTH.

(By H. A. Scomp, in Boston 'Congregationalist'.)

'Grandmamma, do you believe a nigger's got any soul?' The speaker was a Negro boy of about twelve years. The person addressed was his grandmother, 'Aunt Silvy,' a tall, venerable woman of near threescore and ten winters—they had been winters rather than summers.

The boy, called 'Jack' by everybody else, was always invested with the orthodox name of 'Nazarene' by his grandmother—his sole surviving relative—for Aunt Silvy was a pious churchwoman who believed in 'Scriptyur' names for persons and places. Even Jack's dog answered to the biblical name of 'Jonadab.'

Jack, when propounding this psychological 'poser' to his grandmother, was stretched upon the cabin floor, face downward, a book which he had been reading lying between his elbows.

'Does I b'lieve a nigger's got any soul?' slowly repeated Aunt Silvy, looking up from the ironing board at which she had long been working. 'Of course I does. Why, don't de bible say, "Ethiopy shall stretch out her hands unto God"? I'd like to know how Ethiopy'd stretch out her hands if de nigger ain't got any soul?'

'Well,' answered Jack, 'this book, "Ariel," says that a Negro is just a beast, and's got no soul at all.'

'I tell you, Nazarene. "Ethiopy shall stretch out her hands,"' impatiently retorted Aunt Silvy, and Jack, with an unsatisfied expression on his face arose and walked out to the low yard fence, where he stopped and whistled.

Aunt Silvy was very ambitious for her grandchild. She longed to see him educated—get a diplomer, as she expressed it. He was, she believed, a child of destiny. He would be great among his people; perhaps might one day lead 'black Isarel' back to their fatherland. She taught him to read, and had already imbued him with the feeling that he was called to work for his people. For three years he had been a pupil in the school of Miss Northen, a Massachusetts missionary, who taught a school for the freedmen's children in Atlanta.

Jack was already well advanced in his studies. Far into the night the gleam of a tallow 'dip' or of a blazing pine knot would show the boy bending over some book of history or travel, particularly of African exploration or story. From the barracks officers, Miss Northen and others he had received many books, which he read voraciously. A lieutenant in a spirit of teasing had given him a copy of 'Ariel,' which first awoke in him a doubt as to his ownership of that important part—a soul.

When he went out to the fence and whistled it was evidently a signal, for presently a girl about a year younger than himself appeared at the door of the next cabin.

'Come here, Phyllis,' called Jack. 'Have you any soul?'

'To be sure I have. What do you ask that for, Jack?'

'Well,' replied Jack, 'this book says that you ain't, no more than Jonadab here.' The two children sat down under the shade of a holly and read over many pages of the disquieting volume.

'But, Jack,' broke in Phyllis, 'would Miss Northen pray every morning for the Lord to save our souls if we didn't have any?'

'No, I reckon not,' Jack answered, doubtfully; 'but I tell you, Phyllis, I mean to find out all about the Negro,' he added, determinedly.

Just then Aunt Silvy, who had been singing, 'We are climbing Jacob's ladder in the jubilee,' appeared at the door of her cabin, and called, 'Nazarene!'—strong emphasis on 'rene'—'take de close to de barracks.'

She lifted upon the boy's head the basketful of snowy linen, and he trudged away towards the officers' quarters with Jonadab at his heels.

Eight years: Jack Nazarene, now a young man of twenty, is in the senior class of one of the universities of Atlanta. In his thin figure, restless eye and nervous walk we may detect the student and thinker, who has a purpose, a life work before him. He is of those who swerve neither to the right nor the left from a predetermined course. To uplift his people is his self-appointed task. The seed which his grandmother planted is bearing a hundred-fold harvest.

He and Aunt Silvy still occupy their humble home in the fringe of Negro habitations near the trenches. A little garden, carefully tended, contributes much of their short bill of fare. Phyllis, now a young woman, recently graduated, is a teacher in her alma mater. She, too, still lives in her former home.

In the university Jack is a leader, especially in philology and history. He is acknowledged the orator of the school, and is a power among the students. But Africa and the Negro have long absorbed his thoughts. Chiefly through his efforts the African Historical Society had been organized. This had for its chief objects the history and the ethnology of the African race. What has the Negro contributed to universal history? What factor has he been in the world's commerce, politics and civilization? Ancient history, Egyptian monuments—any and every light beam was followed toward its source. A considerable library of books bearing upon these subjects, along with a small museum, had already been accumulated in the society's archives. Perhaps no other student body in America were so well 'posted' upon these specialties. Jack maintained that these questions for them were more than speculative; the vision must take on flesh and blood. It outlined duty for each of them. His enthusiasm quickened them. 'Our mission is to our own people,' was the oft-repeated motto. 'The world must know that we are rising,' Jack insisted.

Aunt Silvy has aged more than the lapse of years would indicate. Hard service at the washtub and ironing board, with scant fare and little recreation, has bent her vigorous frame at last; but her iron will and unbending purpose are as fixed as ever. To see Nazarene graduate, to hold in her own hands that long-coveted diploma, to have her darling ready to lead 'black Isarel,' and she 'would be ready to go,' she said; What aspirations in that lowly dwelling! Daily she admonished Jack that 'Ethiopy must stretch out her hands'—the time was drawing nigh.

Most of that spring she had been confined to her bed. She seemed to live by sheer force of will. 'The Lord'll keep me till Nazarene graduates.' Jack must not quit school on her account. 'No, Nazarene, I'll git along. I'll not go 'fore next June.' She longed to hear his graduating speech. 'You must 'stinguish yourself den,' she would say.

Jack and Phyllis alternately watched by her at night, and some of the neighboring

negroes stayed with her in the daytime. She loved to sing, and even upon her bed would feebly warble her favorite melodies in her wonderfully clear, pathetic tones, chanting in the scanning measure characteristic of the Southern Negroes, e. g.: 'Walk in—the light—beauti—ful light, dew-drops—of mercy—so wondrous—ly bright, shine on—shine on—in thy—beauty, Jesus—the light of—the world.'

Commencement Day, long expected, dawned at last, but Aunt Silvy was weaker. Only her indomitable will seemed to hold to life's trembling thread. She insisted that Nazarene must stand by her bed and deliver his valedictory address. Then, with a proud smile, she turned her face away, saying: 'Now, Nazarene, you must go. Phyllis'll stay with me till you come.'

With sad forebodings and aching heart Jack bade her good-bye, commending her to Phyllis's watchful care. 'I'll watch her, Jack, and send for you, if necessary. Now do your best,' Phyllis coaxingly added.

The great auditorium was crowded. The governor and many other prominent white men had seats upon the rostrum. Jack, being valedictorian, must speak last and at night. His reputation for oratory and his high standing made his address to be anticipated as the speech of the occasion. The African Historical Society, of which he was president, sat in a body before the stage. The Educated Negro's Mission was his theme, and from the opening sentence he held that great audience in the hollow of his hand.

He pledged his fellow-students to their mighty task. The Caucasian's work for the African, he said, is foreign missions; the Negro's is home missions. His evangel is to his own race. To no city of the Samaritans is he sent, but to the tribes of the darker Israel. His enthusiasm became contagious, and when the climax was reached in the appeal to the students to join this army of consecration the great crowd, in breathless excitement, arose en masse. Not until the last well-rounded period had died away in the vaulted arches was the spell broken. Then from a thousand dark throats there burst a shout which made those arches tremble again and again. Who shall tell how many hearts were lifted into a higher life under the magic of that hour?

With a few words the diplomas were awarded. Then the multitude surged around Jack to grasp his hand and offer congratulations. Did any eye mark how suddenly the young orator disappeared from the hall, or how rapidly he threaded his way through alleys and commons toward his humble home?

Through the open window he sees Phyllis softly moving about the lowly bed. Breathless he listens; it is his grandmother's voice, anxiously asking, 'Hasn't he come yet?' 'Yes, grandmamma,' answered Jack, rushing in, 'and here it is,' holding out the parchment. 'It' in that cabin home had for years meant the much-coveted diploma. 'Let me see it,' and Aunt Silvy pressed the red seal to her trembling lips. 'Enough,' she said, presently. 'Now, Nazarene, after you lay me away, maybe you'll go to de Niger and to Dwari, where I was born. A big baobab tree stands dere close to de spring, where dey used to practice de great Obeah. Dere's where de slavemen killed my mother. I want you to build a church dere and teach de poor black sheep—your kin—and—but here consciousness failed her.

Through the long night hours Jack and Phyllis watched. Aunt Silvy talked in an unknown language. It was the long-forgot-