

THE LITTLE FOLK.

HOW NIGGER JACK DIED FOR ME.

THE STORY OF A SLAVE'S DEVOTION.

BY MRS. E. RAYMOND PITMAN.

I was a lieutenant in the Federal army during the American Civil War. When I tell you this, you will quite imagine that my lot was no bed of roses, and you are right. My life, during the three years I served in that part of the army led by General Grant, was made up of hair-breadth escapes, dangerous missions, hard fighting, and scant resting. Indeed, it is quite likely that I should not have been here now, but for the devotion of a poor old nigger, whom we picked up in one of our foraging expeditions, and who literally lost his life to save mine. I never think of him but I feel a choking in my throat; so you'll excuse me if I appear unmanly. But I think I'd be a deal more so if I forgot to render homage to the one who saved my life. Nobody who wasn't hardened and ungrateful could forget old Nigger Jack.

One day, we were marching through a piece of swampy forest land near to a deserted plantation in South Carolina, and, as our company halted for the night, I thought I saw something moving among the bushes at a little distance off. Thinking it might be a spy, I despatched a man to reconnoitre. He soon returned, and saluting, said:

"I have been over yonder, and I've found it's no spy in hiding, but a poor lame old nigger. He can't travel, only crawl, for the fellow to whom he belonged gave him such a kicking before he left the plantation, that to my thinking he's lamed for life. It would be quite a mercy if he died where he is."

"I'll go over and see him," I said, "while you get me some supper."

Leaving my man to look after the rations, I strode over to the thicket. I had a little difficulty in finding out the poor wretch; when I did see him I started at what seemed to be a bundle of blood-stained rags.

"Hullo!" I said. "Where are you? Speak up!"

"I'se here, massa! Nigger Jack I'se called." A quavering, trembling sort of voice came from the depths of the bushes, and a pair of eyes peered up at me. By degrees, too, I was able to see a woolly head and a pair of battered cheeks, as the old fellow slowly rolled round and tried to rise. I had to get nearer, however, and to help him up.

"What's the matter that you can't stand?" I asked, as he failed to get a good footing, even with my assistance.

"Oh, massa! my ole massa was so wicked to me that he kicked me dresful before he went away because I asked him for a bite o' something to eat. And I'se kind of starvin' now; I hain't had nothing but berries and sich-like for more than a week."

This explained his gaunt appearance and the blood which stained his clothing. He had been kicked into helplessness, and nearly starved ever since in the thicket.

"Let me see your legs. Did the old brute kick you there—and there?"

"Yes, massa."

"And didn't you kick him back again?"

"No massa; ob course he owned me, and he could hab killed me if I had kicked him again. You forgit, massa."

Yes, I did forget that Carolina law gave a master the right to kill a slave who turned upon him, even if in self-defence. But as I looked at the poor legs and feet—one mass of bruises—and the venerable white, woolly head clotted with blood, I felt that, had I been behind the scoundrel who once owned this bit of human flesh, and, on that account possessed the legal right to maltreat it I would not have stopped short at rendering kick for kick. And I'm of opinion that a little punishment would have done the planter good.

"But why did the fellow kick you?" I queried.

"Ole massa heard that Massa Lincoln's soldiers

were coming round into dese parts, so he concluded he couldn't keep me after dat."

"And very right too," I said. "Do you know that you are now free?"

"Bress de Lord, I knows, it and I'se been singing de Doxology here in dis swamp quietly to myself ebber so many times because ob it."

"Yes, I should think you are glad to be rid of the service of such a scoundrel of a master as you appear to have had. I suppose you must be set on your feet again, and then look out for those belonging to you; that is, if you've anybody left." I added the last clause because I noticed that a look of sadness crept over his face as I spoke of searching for his scattered family. But I knew that most negroes of his age had wives and children.

"Ah! massa," he said, if freedom had come twenty years ago I should hab been better off, because all my children would hab been around me. If it had come ten years ago I should hab had my wife left. But she was a wonderful cook, and ole massa sold her off into Maryland. I hab seen my children flogged so dresful dat dey has almost been killed. I hab seen my girls sold to be wuss than slaves—down funder south—and I should ha' broke my heart if I hedn't believed in a God."

Yes, that was just it. To the negro in that cruel "house of bondage," God was a sure refuge in all times of trouble. He went on:

"Wedder I shall ebber see any ob 'em again de bressed Lord alone knows. I hope I shall, seein' as I'se no friend on earth. But anyhow I can trust Him, because He has heard our prayers, and come in bloodshed and war to proclaim liberty to de captives. Bress de Lord, too, for Massa Lincoln, and if you are his soldier, bress de Lord for you too, for fighting for him."

"I hope you will find your wife and children," I said; "but in the meantime I must take charge of you. You mustn't stay here and starve, so see if you can't lean on my arm and hobble to my tent."

"Bress you, massa, for dat ar; it is like God's servant to be helping a poor worn out nigger as I am. You got de right spirit in you."

I, Lieutenant Armstrong, of the Seventh Massachusetts Corps, was accustomed to pride myself upon my clean and smart appearance, but by the time I had helped to pull—lift—drag—this poor, dirty wounded, gaunt specimen of nigger humanity back into camp I didn't feel very heroic nor very clean; but I knew that, after all, I had been helping one "for whom Christ died," and that comforted me. Somehow one doesn't always feel grandest over one's best deeds. At least, such is my experience.

When we arrived at my tent the fellows crowded round to have a look at Nigger Jack. The name and the appearance of its owner suited each other well. But our hearts were warmed in the cause of freedom, and we cleansed, succoured, and dressed old Jack with a hearty goodwill. I gave him a suit of old regimentals, which had once belonged to a fellow-soldier who was now lying under the greensward, and finally administered some liquid nourishment with my handa. Then I pointed out to him a rough shake-down in the corner of my tent, where he might sleep that night, and, with murmurs of thanksgiving to God, and gratitude to myself, the poor old fellow crept to slumber.

Next morning we were on the march again, but Nigger Jack contrived, I know not how, to follow my company pretty well. When we halted, he soon made his appearance, and like a friendless waif, clung to me. There was in his eyes something of a lost, hunted look, which witnessed more eloquently than words to the fact of his desertion, cruel treatment, and enslaved condition. Though he was free, he could scarcely realize it. I have seen just such a hunted, appealing loof in the eyes of ill-treated animals before now.

But I think I shall never forget his gratitude when I accidentally discovered for him his long-lost wife. It was in this way we found her.

(To be continued.)