

THE PALIMPSEST

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The Desire for Freedom

In the days before the Civil War a negro family by the name of Pyles lived on a large plantation near Bardstown, Kentucky. This family, which consisted of father, mother, and twelve children, was a favored group, for the father, Harry M. Pyles, was a free negro. His fair complexion and blue eyes indicated a predominantly white parentage. Moreover, he had been well trained in the harness and shoe mending industry, so that he was able to support his family in comfort from the earnings of his little shop.

Tall and straight as a pine was his good wife, Charlotta, whose high cheek bones, copper-colored hue, and straight, glossy, black hair denoted her Indian ancestry. Her father was part German and part negro, while her mother was a full-blooded squaw of the Seminole tribe of Indians. She and her children were slaves of a family named Gordon that lived on a near-by plantation. As the children of a

free negro and a slave followed the status of the mother, Harry M. Pyles was not allowed to have charge of his family, although he could visit them when he wished and no one dared to molest him.

The Gordons were Wesleyan Methodists, and the father of this splendid old family was as fine a Christian as one would meet anywhere. When he died he left Charlotta Pyles and her children as a heritage to his only daughter instead of giving them to his sons. In this respect the family was fortunate, for Miss Gordon allowed them to attend church with her and enjoy many privileges. They were never made to feel that they were slaves.

Miss Gordon was a very conscientious young lady and promised her father on his death bed that she would free this family in accordance with the Wesleyan Methodist rule for the manumission of slaves. In the year 1853, Miss Gordon decided to give her slaves their freedom papers, but to insure their freedom it was necessary to move the entire family North.

Unfortunately the Gordon brothers did not share the religious views of their sister nor her wish to free the slaves. In fact, they envied her the possession of the Pyles family, particularly the boys. One of the latter, Benjamin by name, a tall light-complexioned negro with blue eyes, straight brown hair, and a fine physique, was caught one evening by Miss Gordon's brothers, and sold to a slave-driver in Mississippi. This cowardly act caused Miss Gordon to take immediate action toward removing her slaves

to the North and giving them their freedom. To keep them safe from further kidnapping activities, she took the whole family to Springfield and had them incarcerated for a short time in the local jail.

After certain legal formalities, Miss Gordon established her right to the Pyles family, and at once began preparations to take them North. In those days when the pro-slavery interests were at fever heat on account of the activities of the Abolitionists and the Underground Railroad, it was a very dangerous experience for colored people, especially free negroes, to move about from place to place. Fear that her brothers or others might kidnap some of the family en route, led Miss Gordon to send to Ohio for a white minister, a Reverend Claycome by name, to come to Kentucky and to accompany her and the family northward. Before starting Aunt Charlotta Pyles, as she was commonly called, prepared meats, gingerbread, cakes, and food of every description — enough to last the family during the trip. It would only be necessary then on the way to cook a few corn pones, make coffee, and perhaps to secure a supply of game from time to time.

In the early fall of 1853 the family set out in an old prairie schooner drawn by six thorough-bred Kentucky horses. Four extra horses, to be used to relieve the lead teams, brought up the rear. Household goods were neatly packed in the wagon bed, and women and children were crowded in the remaining available space.

The neighbors regretted their going, for the family had filled a useful place in the community. Aunt Charlotta made the best gingerbread in the neighborhood, and at all basket meetings, protracts, and the like, both white and black, she was always present to sell her famous cookies and other delicacies. Uncle Harry would be missed too, for it would take some time for the white people of the plantations thereabouts to find some one to make harness or half-soles as well as he made them.

In charge of the party was the noble-hearted white woman, Miss Gordon, who was willing to brave the scorn of her relatives, the criticism and reproach of neighbors, and to sacrifice friends, all for the sake of giving this negro family its rightful heritage. Then there was the minister who, through a bond of sympathy for the unfortunate negroes, had left his comfortable home to assist in their flight for freedom. The colored members of the party consisted of Harry M. Pyles, Aunt Charlotta, their eleven children, a small daughter and son belonging to Julian, their oldest girl, and three small boys, the sons of another daughter, Emily. Both these daughters were married but their husbands were slaves belonging to other masters, and therefore could not accompany them to the "Land of Promise".

Shortly after the party was well under way, Miss Gordon discovered that she had forgotten her register and decided to return for it. But when the party arrived at Bardstown, she was told that she could not

have the register, so incensed were the officers in the courthouse over what they considered her foolish act of giving away her property. Thereupon, she proceeded without it.

The party travelled overland to Louisville without any unusual adventures. My mother, Mary Ellen, the youngest of the Pyles children, has often said that when they arrived at Louisville, she thought it was as near like the "Torment" as any place she had ever seen, because of the smoke and fire belching from the factories and distilleries. None of the children stirred far from the wagon because they were afraid they would be burned up.

After Miss Gordon had finished all negotiations with the State officers as to her right to leave Kentucky with her slaves, they boarded one of the old side-wheel steamboats so common on the Ohio in those days, and set out for St. Louis. There they met a white man by the name of Nat. Stone, who promised to guide them to Minnesota for the sum of one hundred dollars. Miss Gordon agreed to pay this amount, and once more the party set out in a covered wagon. Then Stone threatened to turn the negroes over to some slaveholders in Missouri unless he was paid an additional fifty dollars. So afraid was Miss Gordon that her plans would be frustrated that she paid him the extra fifty dollars, and the journey continued. It was a tiresome and difficult journey. Often it was necessary to throw out some meat and to use powder to keep bears and

wolves away from the wagon at night. Many times they were stopped in Missouri, but when the authorities saw two white men and a white woman with the colored people they were permitted to go on, grudgingly but unmolested.

Finally they crossed the Des Moines River into Iowa. It had been Miss Gordon's aim to go on to Minnesota, but by the time the party arrived at Keokuk cold weather had begun, and she decided to end the journey there. Uncle Harry Pyles, being something of a carpenter and mason, as well as a worker in leather, proceeded to build a little brick house for Miss Gordon and the family on Johnson Street.

During the next year, however, he found it increasingly difficult to earn enough to take care of his family, especially since there was the added burden of caring for his two married daughters and their children. The oldest boy, Barney, who had been the main driver on the trip from Kentucky, helped as much as he could with his earnings as an overland freighter from Keokuk to Des Moines.

Finally Aunt Charlotta devised a plan whereby the burden of caring for the families of her two oldest daughters could be shifted to those whose real duty it was to provide for them. She had letters written to the owner of Catiline Walker, the husband of her daughter Emily, and to the owner of Joseph Kendricks, husband of Julian, and found that these men could be bought for fifteen hundred dollars each.

While she was making plans to raise the money to purchase the freedom of her two sons-in-law, her own son, Benjamin, in Mississippi, heard of the scheme and wrote her saying that he, too, could be bought for fifteen hundred dollars. He suggested that only one of his brothers-in-law be purchased along with himself, leaving the other man to trust to fate. Aunt Charlotta, however, felt that, as her son Benjamin was not married and had no little folks to care for, it would be easier for him to liberate himself than for the others to do so. Hence, she wrote him that if he would only trust in God, a way would be provided for him to gain his freedom. This answer irritated Benjamin, and he never wrote to the family again. They did hear, indirectly, that he was later sold into Fayette County, Missouri, and was there known as Benjamin Moore. Then all trace of him was lost, and while advertisements were placed in newspapers to determine his whereabouts, no word from him was ever received again.

As a part of her plan to raise money to buy her sons-in-law, Charlotta Pyles had secured letters of recommendation from prominent white citizens, and, armed with these, she started on her trip East. At the city of Philadelphia she was received cordially by Quaker families, many of whom threw open their doors and entertained her. She also had the privilege of speaking in Independence Hall. The good people of Philadelphia not only entertained her, but allowed her to speak against the wrongs of slavery

in hall, church, and home, and provided her with means to go on and tell her story to others. Oftentimes in her travels she met and exchanged confidences with that fearless and dauntless harbinger of liberty for the negroes, Frederick Douglass.

Through the State of New York and into New England where William Lloyd Garrison, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and others spoke out with all the intensity of their souls against slavery, the good woman travelled. She numbered among her new-made friends, John B. Gough, Lucretia Mott, and Susan B. Anthony. These leaders admired the courage of this untutored negro, and made her way easier by arranging for audiences to hear her. The most precious heirlooms among her descendants to-day are the photos and letters of these men and women, given to Charlotta Pyles as personal reminders of their association with her in a noble cause.

It was a difficult task for a poor, ignorant woman, who had never had a day's schooling in her life, to travel thousands of miles in a strange country and stand up night after night and day after day before crowds of men and women, pleading for those back in slavery. So well did she plead, however, that in about six months she had raised the necessary three thousand dollars, returned to Iowa, thence to Kentucky where she bought the two men from their owners, and reunited them with their families.

Nor did her good work stop here. Many a slave, coming from Kentucký, Tennessee, and Missouri,

found at the gateway into Iowa an enthusiastic member of their own race in the person of Grandma Pyles. She received them into her own home, and, with the aid of many white friends she had made on her trip, helped them to make their escape to Canada. It seems to me that I can still hear ringing in my ears the refrain which my mother used to tell us the slaves would sing when en route to freedom.

O, fare-you-well Kentucky,
You are not the place for me,
I am on my way to Canada,
Where colored men are free.

Among the daughters of Charlotta Pyles was one, Mary Ellen, who had the same indomitable spirit which characterized the mother. She had always been a favorite with Miss Gordon, and back in Kentucky she had been the one who was chosen to live in the Big House with her mistress. Whenever Miss Gordon went to church or visiting she invariably took Mary Ellen with her. Her fair complexion, gray eyes, and light hair frequently caused her to be mistaken for a white child.

I have often heard her, my mother, tell how, after Miss Gordon's father died and she had gone to live in the Big House, she would sometimes imagine that she heard a heavy step like that of Mr. Gordon coming down the stairway, and she could almost see the latch on the stair door raise. Then in terror she would rush to Miss Gordon's side to receive her

kindly embrace and to be assured that it was nothing but a trick of her childish fancy.

Again, mother would tell about a famous old wizard named Rhinehearson who lived not far from Miss Gordon's home in Kentucky. She was mortally afraid of him because he walked on his hands and feet with face and body turned upwards. Rhinehearson was a white man but whenever anyone in the neighborhood, white or black, lost anything they would consult the wizard and he would tell what had become of the lost or stolen article. He was an authority on mysteries and is said never to have laughed until he was seven years old. The incident which provoked his first laughter occurred when his father, in attempting to climb over a stake and rider fence with a small barrel of whisky, dropped the barrel which rolled away down the hill spilling its contents and leaving the owner in deep chagrin.

When Miss Gordon brought her slaves to Iowa, Mary Ellen was about seventeen years old and had never attended school. She eagerly embraced the opportunity to work for a Quaker family in Salem in exchange for her board and the chance to go to school. Later, a similar opportunity was extended to another sister, and in this way the two girls received as good an education as could be had in those early days when schools open to colored people were few indeed.

Miss Gordon, after she had given her slaves their manumission papers, continued to live with the

Pyles family until her death in the early seventies. Both she and Grandma Pyles belonged to the First Baptist Church of Keokuk, and the same pall bearers that carried the remains of Miss Gordon to the grave performed the same honor for Grandma Pyles—Aunt Charlotta—who died in 1880 at the age of seventy-four.

But the spirit of Charlotta Pyles found worthy expression in her children and grandchildren. It was her daughter, Charlotta, who, when she found the doors of the Keokuk High School closed to her son because he was colored, took the matter to the courts and secured the decision which opened the high school to white and black alike. And it was another daughter of Grandma Pyles, Mary Ellen, who, after her marriage to James Addison Morris, a steward on the Diamond Jo Line between St. Paul and St. Louis, reared and educated a family of nine children in Iowa. In her old age she joined her youngest daughter and the latter's husband, Laurence C. Jones, at Piney Woods, Mississippi, where before her death at the age of ninety-one she assisted in the work at Piney Woods School. And so the spirit of a noble woman, Charlotta Pyles, goes marching on in the efforts of her grandchildren to educate the negro race in the Southland.

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