

THE FINEST AGE.

When he was only nine months old, And plump and round and pink of cheek, A joy to tickle and to hold, Before he'd even learned to speak, His gentle mother used to say "It is too bad that he must grow. If I could only have my way His baby ways we'd always know."

—Edgar Guest.

THE FIELD OF HONOR.

A Story of Courage and Self-sacrifice.

Old Eph's favorite stand was on Tremont street, just outside the subway kiosk, where every foot in Boston soon or late must pass. He appeared here about dusk every evening, when the rush was over, and he hugged his banjo to his ragged breast, and picked at it and crooned his old melodies so long as there were any to listen. When coins were tossed him, he had a nimble trick of whisking his banjo bottom side up, catching the contribution, flipping it into the air and pocketing it without interrupting his music. Each time he did this, his fingers returned to the strings with a sweep and a clang that suggested the triumphant notes of trumpets.

When a particularly liberal coin came his way, he gave thanks in the midst of his song. Thus: "I'm comin' in your way; and my head is thank ye, dar'nt."

I hear dem darkey voices calling: Yes, mum-mum-am.

No one ever saw Eph about the streets in the daytime. He appeared at dusk; and it was known that he sometimes remained at his post, singing and picking at his banjo, long after the streets were empty. Sometimes, in those hours between night and morning, when there were no one near, the songs he sang became ineffably sad and mournful, he crooned them, under his breath, and his sweet old voice was like a low lament. Once Walter Ragan, the patrolman on the beat, passing along at four in the morning, heard Eph singing, over and over:

"Tramp, tramp, tramp! De boys is marching."

Ragan came up quietly behind him and asked: "What's the matter, Eph?"

As the old negro looked up, Ragan saw that there were tears on his black cheeks, but Eph grinned cheerfully as he said:

"Jes' thinkin' on de old times, Mist' Ragan. Thinkin' on de old times, suh."

There was something so pathetic about the lonely old figure that Ragan, with gruff kindness, ordered the darkey to go on home. Eph got up and tucked his banjo under his arm.

"Yas suh, Mist' Ragan. Yas, suh. I'm goin' right along." And crossing the street, he started up Beacon Hill.

"The darned old nut," said Ragan gruffly to himself as he watched old Eph shuffle off into the darkness.

"No sense enough to go to bed."

And he went on down the street whistling between his teeth and trying not to think of Eph's bowed body and the tears upon the black old cheeks.

Eph's songs in the old days, were simple darkey ballads, or lullabies, or the songs of the Southland that all the world knows. His listeners used to ask for certain ones that were their favorites; and sometimes Eph sang what they wished to hear, and sometimes he refused. He would never sing "Dixie."

"I ain' no slave nigger," he would protest. "I fit ag'in de South, in de big war. Rackson I'm gwine sing dat song? Lawdy, man, no, suh."

They told him laughingly, that he was over. "Da's all right," he agreed. "De war's over. Mebbe so. But I ain' over! An' I don' sing no rebellions. Na, suh!"

Those who had enough curiosity to make inquiries found that Eph really had fought for the North. He had served in that colored regiment whose black ranks are immortalized in the Shaw Memorial, opposite the State House, just up the hill from where Eph had his nightly stand. And, by the same token, though he would never sing "Dixie," it required no more than a word to start him off on that mighty Battle Hymn, "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory."

When he sang this, his old voice rolled and thrummed and thrummed with a roar like the roar of drums, and there was the beat of marching feet in the cadence of his song. His banjo tinkled and shrilled as he sang them, and his bent shoulders straightened, and his head flung high, and his old eyes snapped and shone.

When Europe went to war, Eph forsook the gentler melodies and chose songs with a martial swing. And when he sang them there was the blare of bugles in his voice. He was, from the beginning, violently against the Germans; and now and then, when his enthusiasm overcame him, he delivered an oration on the subject of his nightly audience. When the United States entered the war, he went unostentatiously to the recruiting office and offered himself to the country.

"I've come to join up in the army,"

suh," Eph said to the sergeant in charge. "You mean you want to enlist?"

"Yas, suh, jes' dat."

The Sergeant considered. "I'll tell you old man," he said; "I'm afraid you're over the age limit."

"What de age limit?" Eph asked cautiously.

"Forty-five."

Eph cackled with delight. "I declare, dat jes' lets me in. Me, I'm gwine on fo'ty four this minute."

"Ge out!" protested the sergeant. "You'll never see seventy-four again. You're too old and your eyes are no good, and your teeth are gone."

"I can pint a gun an' pull a trigger," Eph urged wheedlingly.

"There's more than that to war," the sergeant told him, and Eph's eyes glazed.

"What you know about war, man?" he demanded. "Ain' I been in it?"

Ain' I slep in de rain, an' et raw corn, an' fit in mud to de knees, an' got a bullet in my laig, an' laid out in de snow three days till they come and fetch me in? Don' you let on about war tuh me, I been it, an' i done it, Eph was so dead earnest that the sergeant's voice was full of sympathy as he dropped his hand on Eph's shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said. "Pts no use."

Eph passed from anger to pleading. "Spos'n Iuz to go along an' sing to um."

"No; they wouldn't take you."

"I'm a jim-dandy cook," Eph offered pitifully.

"Get out of here, you damned old scamp!" the sergeant exclaimed with assumed fierceness which did not at all deceive old Eph. He knew white folks, and he understood that this was only the sergeant's way of saying that there was no hope at all and that he was sorry. So Eph said simply, "Thank'ee, sir," and with a sad and dreary dignity he went down the stairs to the street, and home to the little room where he lodged.

During the day the billowy negroess who kept his boarding house heard little cries and lamentations coming from behind his closed door; and once she knocked and offered her comfort. But Eph nursed his sorrow alone.

That night he made an innovation in his singing. Across the street rose the spire of the Park Street Church. And whenever the hands of the clock in the spire touched the hour, old Eph rose, took off his hat, and lifted up his voice and sang:

"Oh, say, kin you see . . ."

He sang this each hour that evening, and each hour in all the evenings that were to come. At first people thought he was playing patriotism for his own ends; but when they felt the wistful tenderness in his tones, they faintly understood and more respected him.

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look into his eyes. "Y'all know dat ain' right," he said steadily. "How come you want to pester an' ol' nigger lak me?"

Jim was ashamed of himself, but he stuck to his attack. "Maybe they told me wrong," he said. "Maybe they were trying to start trouble between us. What was the straight of it? Didn't you fight in the war at all?"

Eph tapped Jim slowly on the breast. "Nemmine me," he said slowly. "Nemmine me. Let's talk 'bout you. How come you ain' got on one of dem khaki uniforms, boy? How come?"

The attack was so unexpected, it struck so acutely to the mark, that Jim was silenced. But Ragan took his part. "There now!" he said. "Jim's all right. But he's got a mother's support. I'm not take care of him myself will."

Eph looked from Jim to Ragan, puzzling. "Ain' he got tuh tek care of dis country, too?" he demanded. "Why can't his maw tek in washin'?"

Ragan chuckled. "Don't you worry," he told Eph. "Jim will go when they call. Why here, Eph? He wants to write this story about you, so he can make extra money—get enough ahead so he can go. . . . Enough to take care of his mother."

Jim had turned hopelessly away. Eph looked at the boy's straight shoulders, looked long and thoughtfully. Then the old devil did a surprising thing. He crossed, and touched Eph's arm.

"You, suh," he said softly. "Jim looked at him. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I won't bother you any more.'"

Eph chuckled. "Lawdy, man, you cain' bother me. Listen. . . . You come 'long home with me now. I aim tuh talk to you some."

Jim hesitated. "You come 'long," Eph insisted, and took Jim's arm and turned him about and led the boy, half unwillingly, across the street, past the tall old church and up the hill.

There is some quality which possesses the souls of good old negroes that gives them a power not granted to other men. They have, above everything, the ability to inspire confidence, to win confidences. Perhaps this is because of their simplicity, or because of their vast sympathy. White children in the South will love and trust their darkey friends and will share with them their white mate secrets of childhood from which even parents are excluded. These old darkeys have a talisman against the griefs that visit others; they murmur, "Nemmine now, chile!" in their own sorrow, they weep and lament theatrically. But when white folks weep, the darkey has comfort to give, and he gives it. . . . To tell them a secret is like whispering it to one's own self.

Jim Forrest was never able to understand how he had been led to un-bosom his heart to Eph; but he did. The negro took him over Beacon Hill, down to a little room that was as clean as a new pin. It was tiny, but Jim, who had come to hear Eph's story