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**The American Negro Academy.**

**OCCASIONAL PAPERS No 7.**

## **Right on the Scaffold, or The Martyrs of 1822.**

**By MR. ARCHIBALD H. GRIMKE.**

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### **The Martyrs of 1822.**

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He was black but comely. Nature gave him a royal body, nobly planned and proportioned, and noted for its great strength. There was that in his countenance, which bespoke a mind within to match that body, a mind of uncommon native intelligence, force of will, and capacity to dominate others. His manners were at once abrupt and crafty, his temper was imperious, his passions and impulses were those of a primitive ruler, and his heart was the heart of a lion. He was often referred to as an old man, but he was not an old man, when he died on a gallows at Charleston, S. C., July 2, 1822. No, he was by no means an old man, whether judged by length of years or strength of body, for he was on that memorable July day, seventy-eight years ago, not more than fifty-six years old, although the hair on his head and face was then probably white. This circumstance and the pre-eminence accorded him by his race neighbors, might account for the references to him, as to that of an old man.

All things considered, he was truly an extraordinary man. It is impossible to say where he

was born, or who were his parents. He was, alas! as far as my knowledge of his personal history goes, a man without a past. He might have been born of slave parentage in the West Indies, or of royal ones in Africa, where, in that case, he was kidnapped and sold subsequently into slavery in America. I had almost said that he was a man without a name. He is certainly a man without ancestral name. For the name to which he answered up to the age of fourteen, has been lost forever. After that time he has been known as Denmark Vesey. Denmark is a corruption of Telemaque, the praenomen bestowed upon him at that age by a new master, and Vesey was the cognomen of that master who was captain of an American vessel, engaged in the African slave trade between the islands of St. Thomas and Sto. Domingo. It is on board of Captain Vesey's slave vessel that we catch the earliest glimpse of our hero. Deeply interesting moment is that, which revealed thus to us the Negro lad, deeply interesting and tragical for one and the same cause.

This first appearance of him upon the stage of history occurred in the year which ended virtually the war for American Independence, 1781, during the passage between St. Thomas and Cap Francais, of Captain Vesey's slave bark with a cargo of 390 slaves. The lad, Telemaque, was a part of that sad cargo, undistinguished at the outset of the voyage from the rest of the human freight. Of the 389 others, we know absolutely nothing. Not an incident, nor a token, not even a name has floated to us across the intervening years, from all that multitudinous misery, from such an unspeakable tragedy, except that the ship reached its destination, and the slaves were sold. Like boats that pass at sea, that slave vessel loomed for a lurid instant on the horizon, and was gone forever—all but Denmark Vesey. How it happened that he did not vanish with the rest of his ill-fated fellows, will be set down in this paper, which has essayed to describe the slave plot which he planned, with which his name is identified, and by which it ought to be, for all time, hallowed in the memory of every man, woman and child of Negro descent in America.

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On that voyage Captain Vesey was strongly attracted by the "beauty, intelligence, and alertness" of one of the slaves on board. So were the ship's officers. This particular object of interest, on the part of the slave-traders, was a black boy of fourteen summers. He was quickly made a sort of ship's pet and plaything, receiving new garments from his admirers, and the high sounding name, as I have already mentioned, of Telemaque, which in slave lingo was subsequently metamorphosed into Denmark. The lad found himself in sudden favor, and lifted above his companions in bondage by the brief and idle regard of that ship's company. Brief and idle, indeed, was the interest which he had aroused in the breasts of those men, as the sequel showed. But while it lasted it seemed doubtless very genuine to the boy, as such evidences of human regard must have afforded him, in his forlorn state, the keenest pleasure. Bitter, therefore, must have been his disappointment and grief to find, at the end, that he had, in reality, no hold whatever upon the regard of the slave traders. True he had been separated by captain and officers from the other slaves during the voyage, but this ephemeral distinction was speedily lost upon the arrival of the vessel at Cap Francais, for he was then sold as a part of the human freight. Ah! he had not been to those men so much as even a pet cat or dog, for with a pet cat or dog they would not have so lightly parted, as they had done with him. He had served their purpose, had killed for them the dull days of a dull sail between ports, and he a boy with warm blood in his heart, and hot yearnings for love in his soul.

But the slave youth, so beautiful and attractive, was not to live his life in the island of Sto. Domingo, or to terminate just then his relations with the ship and her officers, however much Captain Vesey had intended to do so. For Fate, by an unexpected circumstance, threw, for better or for worse, master and slave together again, after they had apparently parted forever in the slave mart of the Cape. This is how Fate played the unexpected in the boy's life. According to a local law for the regulation of the slave trade in that place, the seller of a slave of unsound health might be compelled by the buyer to take him back, upon the production of a certificate to that effect from the royal physician of the port. The purchaser of Telemaque availed himself of this law to redeliver him to Captain Vesey on his return voyage to Sto. Domingo. For the royal physician of the town had meanwhile certified that the lad was subject to epileptic fits. The act of sale was thereupon cancelled, and the old relations of master and slave between Captain Vesey and Telemaque, were resumed. Thus, without design, perhaps, however passionately he might have desired it, the boy found himself again on board of his old master's slave vessel, where he had been petted and elevated in favor high above his fellow-slaves. I say *perhaps* advisedly, for I confess that it is by no means clear to me whether those epileptic fits were real or whether they were in truth feigned, and therefore the initial *ruse de guerre* of that bright young intelligence in its long battle with slavery.

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However, I do not mean to consume space with speculations on this head. Suffice to say that Telemaque's condition was improved by the event. Nor had Captain Vesey any cause to quarrel with the fate which returned to him the beautiful Negro youth. For it is recorded that for twenty years thereafter he proved a faithful servant to the old slave trader, who retiring in due course of time from his black business, took up his abode in Charleston, S. C., where Denmark went to live with him. There in his new home dame fortune again remembered her protege, turning her formidable wheel a second time in his favor. It was then that Denmark, grown to manhood, drew the grand prize of freedom. He was about thirty-four years old when this immense boon came to him.

It is not known for how many eager and anxious months or even years, Denmark Vesey had patronized East Bay Street Lottery of Charleston prior to 1800, when he was rewarded with a prize of \$1,500. With \$600 of this money he bought himself of Captain Vesey. He was at last his own master, in possession of a small capital, and of a good trade, carpentry, which he practiced with great industry. He was successful, massed in time considerable wealth, became a solid man of the community in spite of his color, winning the confidence of the whites, and respect from the blacks amounting almost to reverence. He married—was much married it was said, which I see no reason to doubt, in view of the polygamous example set him by many of the respectabilities of the master-race in that remarkably pious old slave town. A plurality of children rose up, in consequence, to him from the plurality of his family ties; rose up to him, but they were not his, for following the condition of the mothers, they were, under the Slave-Code, the chattels of other men.

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This cruel wrong eat deep into Vesey's mind. Of course it was most outrageous for him, a black man, to concern himself so much about the human chattels of white men, albeit those human chattels were his own children. What had he, a social pariah in Christian America, to do with such high caste things as a heart and natural affections? But somehow he did have a heart, and it was in the right place, and natural affections for his own flesh and blood, like men with a white skin. 'Twas monstrous in him to be sure, but he could not help it. The slave iron had entered his soul, and the wound which it made rankled in secret there.

Not alone the sad condition of his own children embittered his lot, but the sad condition of other black men's children as well. He yearned to help all to better social conditions—to that freedom which is the gift of God to mankind. He yearned to possess this God-given boon, in its fullness and entirety, for himself before he passed thence to the grave. For he possessed it not. He had indeed bought himself, but he soon learned that the right to himself which he had purchased from his master was not the freedom of a man, but the freedom accorded by the Slave-Code, to a black man, a freedom so restrictive in quantity and mean in quality that no white man, however low, could be made to live contentedly under it for a day.

In judging this black man, oh! ye critics and philosophers, judge him not hastily and harshly before you have at least tried to put yourselves in his place. You may not even then succeed in doing him justice, for while he had his faults, and was sorely tempted, he was, nevertheless, in every inch of him, from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head, a man.

At the period which we have now reached in his history, he was in possession of a fairly good education—was able to read and write, and to speak with fluency the French and English languages. He had traveled extensively over the world in his master's slave vessel, and had thus obtained a stock of valuable experiences, and a wide range of knowledge of men and things of which few inhabitants, whether black or white, in the slave community of Charleston, during the first quarter of the nineteenth century could truthfully have boasted. Yet in spite of these undeniable facts, in spite of his unquestioned ability and economic efficiency as an industrial factor in that city, he was in legal and actual ownership of precious little of that right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" which the most ignorant and worthless white man enjoyed as a birthright. Wherever he moved or wished to move he was met and surrounded by the most galling and degrading social and civil conditions and proscriptions. True he held a bill of sale of his person, had ceased to be the chattel property of an individual, but he still wore chains, which kept him, and which were intended to keep him and such as him, slaves of the community forever, deprived of every civil right which white men, their neighbors, were bound to respect. For instance, were he wronged in his person or property by any member of the dominant race, be the offender man, woman, or child, Vesey could have had no redress in the courts, in case, the proof of his complaint or the enforcement of his claim depended exclusively upon the testimony of himself and of that of black witnesses, however respectable.

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Such a man, we may be sure, was conscious of the possession, notwithstanding his black skin and blacker social and civil condition, of longings, aspirations, which the Slave-Code made it a crime for him to satisfy. He must have felt the stir of forces and faculties within him, which, under the heaviest pains and penalties, he was forbidden to exercise. Thus robbed of freedom, ravished of manhood, what was he to do? Ay, what ought he to have done under the circumstances? Ought he to have done what multitudes had done before him, meek and submissive folk, generations and generations of them, borne tamely like them his chains, without an effort to break them, and break instead his lion's spirit? Ought he to have contented himself with such a woeful existence, and to have been willing at its end to mingle his ashes with the miserable dust of all those countless masses of forgotten and unresisting slaves? "Never!" replied what was bravest and worthiest of respect in the breast of this truly great-hearted man. The burning wrong which he felt against slavery had sunk in his mind below the reach of the grappling tongs of reason. It lay like a charge of giant powder, with its slow match attachment in the unplumbed depths of a soul which knew not fear; of a soul which was as hot with smouldering hate and rage as is a live volcano with its unvomited flame and lava. As well, under the circumstances, have tried to subdue the profound fury of the one with argument, as to quench the hidden fires of the other with water.

He knew, none better, that his oppressors were strong and that he was weak; that he had but one slender chance in a hundred of redressing by force the wrongs of himself and race. He knew too, that failure in such a desperate enterprise could have for himself but a single

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issue, viz.: certain death. But he believed that success on the other hand meant for him and his the gain of that which alone was able to make their lives worth the living, to wit.: a free man's portion, his opportunity for the full development and free play of all of his powers amid that society in which was cast his lot. And for that portion, so precious, he was ready to take the one chance with all of its tremendous risks, to stake that miserable modicum of freedom which he possessed, the wealth laboriously accumulated by him, and life itself.

It is impossible to fix exactly the time when the bold idea of resistance entered his brains, or to say when he began to plan for its realization, and after that to prepare the blacks for its reception. Before embarking on his perilous enterprise he must have carefully reckoned on time, long and indefinite, as an essential factor in its successful achievement. For, certain it is, he took it, years in fact, made haste slowly and with supreme discretion and self-control. He appeared to have thoroughly acquainted himself with the immense difficulties which beset an uprising of the blacks. Not once, I think, did he underestimate the strength of his foes. A past grand master in the art of intrigue among the servile population, he was equally adept in knowledge of the weak spots for attack in the defences of the slave system, knew perfectly where the masters could best be taken at a disadvantage. All the facts of his history combine to give him a character for profound acting. In the underground agitation, which during a period of three or four years, he conducted in the city of Charleston and over a hundred miles of the adjacent country, he seemed to have been gifted with a sort of Protean ability. His capacity for practicing secrecy and dissimulation where they were deemed necessary to his end, must have been prodigious, when it is considered that during the years covered by his underground agitation, it is not recorded that he made a single false note, or took a single false step to attract attention to himself and movement, or to arouse over all that territory included in that agitation and among all those white people involved in its terrific consequences, the slightest suspicion of danger.

In his underground agitation, Vesey, with an instinct akin to genius, seemed to have excluded from his preliminary action everything like conscious combination or organization among his disciples, and to have confined himself strictly to the immediate business in hand at that stage of his plot, which was the sowing of seeds of discontent, the fomenting of hatred among the blacks, bond and free alike, toward the whites. And steadily with that patience which Lowell calls the "passion of great hearts," he pushed deeper and deeper into the slave lump the explosive principles of inalienable human rights. He did not flinch from kindling in the bosoms of the slaves a hostility toward the masters as burning as that which he felt toward them in his own breast. He had, indeed, reached such a pitch of race enmity that, as he was often heard to declare, "he would not like to have a white man in his presence."

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And so, devoured by a supreme passion, mastered by a single predominant idea, Vesey looked for occasions, and when they were wanting he created them, to preach his new and terrible gospel of liberty and hate. Thus only could he hope to render their condition intolerable to the slaves, the production of which was the indispensable first step in the consummation of his design. Otherwise what possibility of final success could a contented slave population have offered him? He needed a fulcrum on which to plant his lever. He had nowhere in such an enterprise to place it, but in the discontent and hatred of the slaves toward their masters. Therefore on the fulcrum of race hatred he rested his lever of freedom for his people.

As the discontented bondsmen heard afresh with Vesey's ears the hateful clank of their chains, they would, in time, learn to think of Vesey and to turn, perhaps, to him for leadership and deliverance. Brooding over their lot as Vesey had revealed it to them, they might move of themselves to improve or end it altogether, by adopting some such bold plan as Vesey's. Meantime he would continue to wait and prepare for that moment, while they would be training in habits of deceit, of deep dissimulation, that formidable weapon of the weak in conflict with the strong, that *ars artium* of slaves in their attempts to break their chains—a habit of smiling and fawning on unjust and cruel power, while bleeds in secret their fiery wound, rages and plots there also their passionate hate, and glows there too their no less passionate hope for freedom.

Everywhere through the dark subterranean world of the slave, in Charleston and the neighboring country, went with his great passion of hate and his great purpose of freedom, this untiring breeder of sedition. And where he moved beneath the thin crust of that upper world of the master-race, there broke in his wake whirling and shooting currents of new and wild sensations in the abysses of that under world of the slave-race. Down deep below the ken of the masters was toiling this volcanic man, forming the lava-floods, the flaming furies, and the awful horrors of a slave uprising.

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Nowhere idle was that underground plotter against the whites. Even on the street where he happened to meet two or three blacks, he would bring the conversation to his one consuming subject, and preach to them his one unending sermon of freedom and hate. It was then as if his stern voice, with its deep organ chords of passion, was saying to those men: "Forget not, oh my brothers your misery. Remember how ye are wronged every day and hour, ye and your mothers and sisters, your wives and children. Remember the generations gone weeping and clanking heavy chains from the cradle to the grave. Remember the oppression of the living, who with heart-break and death-wounds, are treading their mournful way in bitter anguish and despair across burning desert sands, with

parched soul and shriveled minds, with piteous thirsts, and terrible tortures of body and spirit. Weep for them, weep for yourselves too, if ye will, but learn to hate, ay, to hate with such hatred as blazes within me, the wicked slave-system and the wickeder white men who oppress and wrong us thus."

Ever on the alert was he for a text or a pretext to advance his underground movement. Did he and fellow blacks for example, encounter a white person on the street, and did Vesey's companions make the customary bow, which blacks were wont to make to whites, a form of salutation born of generations of slave-blood, meanly humble and cringingly self-effacing, rebuking such an exhibition of sheer and shameless servility and lack of proper self-respect, he would thereupon declare to them the self-evident truth that all men were born free and equal, that the master, with his white skin, was in the sight of God no whit better than his black slaves, and that for himself he would not cringe like that to any man.

Should the sorry wretches, bewildered by Vesey's boldness and dazed by his terrifying doctrines, reply defensively "we are slaves," the harsh retort "you deserve to remain so," was, without doubt, intended to sting if possible, their abject natures into sensibility on the subject of their wrongs, to galvanize their rotting souls back to manhood, and to make their base and sieve-like minds capable of receiving and retaining, at least, a single fermenting idea. And when Vesey was thereupon asked "What can we do?" he knew by that token that the sharp point of his spear had pierced the slavish apathy of ages of oppression, and that thenceforth light would find its red and revolutionary way to the imprisoned minds within. To the query "What can we do?" his invariable response was, "Go and buy a spelling book and read the fable of Hercules and the Wagoner." They were to look for Hercules in their own stout arms and backs, and not in the clouds, to brace their iron shoulders against the wheels of adversity and oppression, and to learn that self-help was ever the best prayer.

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At other times, in order to familiarize the blacks, I suppose, with the notion of equality, and to heighten probably at the same time his influence over them, he would select a moment when some of them were within earshot, to enter into conversation with certain white men, whose characters he had studied for his purpose, and during the shuttle-cock and battledore of words which was sure to follow, would deftly let fly some bold remark on the subject of slavery. "He would go so far," on such occasions it was said, "that had not his declarations in such situations been clearly proved, they would scarcely have been credited." Such action was daring almost to rashness, but in it is also apparent the deep method of a clever and calculating mind.

The sundry religious classes or congregations with Negro leaders or local preachers, into which were formed the Negro members of the various churches of Charleston, furnished Vesey with the first rudiments of an organization, and at the same time with a singularly safe medium for conducting his underground agitation. It was customary, at that time, for these Negro congregations to meet for purposes of worship entirely free from the presence of the whites. Such meetings were afterward forbidden to be held except in the presence of at least one representative of the dominant race. But during the three or four years prior to the year 1822, they certainly offered Denmark Vesey regular, easy and safe opportunities for preaching his gospel of liberty and hate. And we are left in no doubt whatever in regard to the uses to which he put those gatherings of blacks.

Like many of his race he possessed the gift of gab, as the silver in the tongue and the gold in the full or thick-lipped mouth are oftentimes contemptuously characterized. And like many of his race he was a devoted student of the Bible to whose interpretation he brought like many other Bible students, not confined to the Negro race, a good deal of imagination, and not a little of superstition, which with some natures is perhaps but another name for the desires of the heart. Thus equipped it is no wonder that Vesey, as he pored over the Old Testament Scriptures, found many points of similitude in the history of the Jews and that of the slaves in the United States. They were both peculiar peoples. They were both Jehovah's peculiar peoples, one in the past, the other in the present. And it seemed to him that as Jehovah bent his ear, and bared his arm once in behalf of the one, so would he do the same for the other. It was all vividly real to his thought, I believe, for to his mind thus had said the Lord.

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He ransacked the Bible for apposite and terrible texts, whose commands in the olden times, to the olden people, were no less imperative upon the new times and the new people. This new people was also commanded to arise and destroy their enemies and the city in which they dwelt, "both man and woman, young and old, \* \* \* with the edge of the sword." Believing superstitiously, as he did, in the stern and Nemesis-like God of the Old Testament, he looked confidently for a day of vengeance and retribution for the blacks. He felt, I doubt not, something peculiarly applicable to his enterprise, and intensely personal to himself in the stern and exultant prophecy of Zachariah, fierce and sanguinary words which were constantly in his mouth: "Then shall the Lord go forth, and fight against those nations, as when he fought in the day of battle." According to Vesey's lurid exegeisis "those nations" in the text meant, beyond a peradventure, the cruel masters, and Jehovah was to go forth to fight against them for the poor slaves, and on which ever side fought that day the Almighty God, on that side would assuredly rest victory and deliverance.

It will not be denied that Vesey's plan contemplated the total annihilation of the white population of Charleston. Nursing for many dark years the bitter wrongs of himself and race

had filled him, without doubt, with a mad spirit of revenge, and had so given him a decided predilection for shedding the blood of his oppressors. But if he intended to kill them to satisfy a desire for vengeance, he intended to do so also on broader ground. The conspirators, he argued, had no choice in the matter, but were compelled to adopt a policy of extermination by the necessity of their position. The liberty of the blacks was in the balance of fate against the lives of the whites. He could strike that balance in favor of the blacks only by the total destruction of the whites. Therefore, the whites, men, women and children, were doomed to death. "What is the use of killing the louse and leaving the nit?" he asked coarsely and grimly on an occasion when the matter was under consideration. And again he was reported to have, with unrelenting temper, represented to his friends in secret council, that, "It was for our safety not to spare one white skin alive." And so it was unmistakably in his purpose to leave not a single egg lying about Charleston, when he was done with it, out of which might possibly be hatched another future slave-holder and oppressor of his people. "Thorough" was in truth, the merciless motto of that terrible man.

All roads, on the red map of his plot, led to Rome. Every available instrument which fell in his way, he utilized to deepen and extend his underground agitation among the blacks. Wherefore it was that he seized upon the sectional struggle which was going on in Congress over the admission of Missouri, and pressed it to do service for his cause. The passionate wish, unconsciously perhaps, colored if it did not create the belief on his part, that the real cause of that great debate in Washington, and excitement in the country at large, was a movement for general emancipation of the slaves. It was said that he went so far in this direction as to put it into the heads of the blacks that Congress had actually enacted an emancipation law, and that therefore their continued enslavement was illegal. Such preaching must have certainly added fresh fuel to the deep sense of injury, then burning in the breasts of many of the slaves, and must have operated also to prepare them for the next step which Vesey's plan of campaign contemplated, viz.: a resort to force to wrest from the whites the freedom which was theirs, not only by the will of Heaven, but as well by the supreme law of the land.

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A period of underground agitation, such as Vesey had carried on for about three or four years, will, unless arrested, pass naturally into one of organized action. Vesey's movement reached, in the winter of 1821-22, such a stage. As far as it is known, he had up to this time done the work of agitator singlehanded and alone. Singlehanded and alone he had gone to and fro through that under world of the slave, preaching his gospel of liberty and hate. But about Christmas of 1821, the long lane of his labors made a sharp turn. This circumstance tended necessarily to throw other actors upon the scene, as shall presently appear.

The first step taken at the turn of his long and laborious lane was calculated to put to the utmost test his ability as a leader, as an arch plotter. For it was nothing less momentous than the choice by him of fit associates. On the wisdom with which such a choice was made, would depend his own life and the success of his undertaking. Among thousands of disciples he had to find the right men to whom to entrust his secret purpose and its execution in co-operation with himself. The step was indeed crucial and in taking it he needed not alone the mental qualities which he had exhibited in his role of underground agitator, viz.: serpent-like cunning and intelligence under the direction of the most alert and flexible discretion, but as well a practical and profound knowledge of the human nature with which he had to deal, a keen and infallible insight into individual character.

It is not too much to claim for Denmark Vesey, that his genius rose to the emergency, and proved itself equal to a surpassingly difficult situation, in the singular fitness of the five principal men on whom fell his election to associate leadership, with himself, and to the work of organizing the blacks for resistance. These five men, who became his ablest and most efficient lieutenants, were Peter Poyas, Rolla and Ned Bennett, Monday Gell and Gullah Jack. They were all slaves and, I believe, full-blooded Negroes. They constituted a remarkable quintet of slave leaders, combined the very qualities of head and heart which Vesey most needed at the stage then reached by his unfolding plot. For fear lest some of their critics might sneer at the sketch of them which I am tempted to give, as lacking in probability and truth, I will insert instead the careful estimate placed upon them severally by their slave judges. And here it is: "In the selection of his leaders, Vesey showed great penetration and sound judgment. Rolla was plausible and possessed uncommon self-possession: bold and ardent, he was not to be deterred from his purpose by danger. Ned's appearance indicated that he was a man of firm nerves and desperate courage. Peter was intrepid and resolute, true to his engagements, and cautious in observing secrecy where it was necessary; he was not to be daunted nor impeded by difficulties, and though confident of success, was careful against any obstacles or casualties which might arise, and intent upon discovering every means which might be in their favor if thought of beforehand. Gullah Jack was regarded as a sorcerer, and as such feared by the natives of Africa, who believe in witchcraft. He was not only considered invulnerable, but that he could make others so by his charms; and that he could and certainly would provide all his followers with arms. He was artful, cruel, bloody; his disposition in short was diabolical. His influence among the Africans was inconceivable. Monday was firm, resolute, discreet and intelligent."

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From this picture, painted by bitter enemies, who were also their executioners, could any person, ignorant of the circumstances and the history of those men, possibly guess, with the exception of Gullah Jack, to what race the originals belonged, or think you, that such a

person would so much as dream that they were in fact, as they were in the eye of the law under which they lived, nothing more than so many human chattels, subject like cattle to the caprice and the cruelty of their owners?

Such nevertheless was the remarkable group of blacks on whom had fallen Vesey's choice. And did they not present an assemblage of high and striking qualities? Here were coolness in action, calculation, foresight, plausibility in address, fidelity to engagements, secretiveness, intrepid courage, nerves of iron in the presence of danger, inflexible purpose, unbending will, and last though not least in its relations to the whole, superstition incarnate in the character of the Negro conjurer. Masterly was indeed the combination, and he had no ordinary gift for leadership, who was able to hit it off at one surprising stroke.

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As the work of organized preparation for the uprising advanced, Vesey added presently to his staff two principal and several minor recruiting agents, who operated in Charleston and in the country to the North of the city as far as the Santee, the Combahee, and Georgetown. Their exploitation in the interest of the plot extended to the South into the two large islands of James and John's, as well as to plantations across the Ashley River. Vesey himself, it was said, traveled southwardly from Charleston between seventy and eighty miles, and it was presumed by the writers that he did so on business connected with the conspiracy, which I consider altogether probable. He had certainly thrown himself into the movement with might and main. We know, that its direction absorbed finally his whole time and energy. "He ceased working himself at his trade," so ran the testimony of a witness at his trial, "and employed himself exclusively in enlisting men."

The number of blacks engaged in the enterprise was undoubtedly large. It is a sufficiently conservative estimate to place this number, I think, at two or three thousand, at least. One recruiting officer alone, Frank Ferguson, enlisted in the undertaking the slaves of four plantations within forty miles of the city; and in the city itself, it was said that the personal roll of Peter Poyas embraced a membership of six hundred names. More than one witness placed the conjectural strength of Vesey's forces as high as 9,000, but I am inclined to write this down as a gross overestimate of the people actually enrolled as members of the conspiracy.

Here is an example of the nice calculation and discretion of the man who was the soul of the conspiracy. It is contained in the testimony of an intensely hostile witness, a slave planter, whose slaves were suspected of complicity in the intended uprising.

"The orderly conduct of the Negroes in any district of country within forty miles of Charleston," wrote this witness, "is no evidence that they were ignorant of the intended attempt. A more orderly gang than my own is not to be found in this State, and one of Denmark Vesey's directions was, that they should assume the most implicit obedience."

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Take another instance of the extraordinary aptitude of the slave leaders for the conduct of their dangerous enterprise. It illustrates Peter's remarkable foresight and his faculty for scenting danger, and making at the same time provision for meeting it. In giving an order to one of his assistants, said he, "Take care and don't mention it (the plot) to those waiting men who receive presents of old coats, &c., from their masters or they'll betray us." And then as if to provide doubly against betrayal at their hands, he added "I'll speak to them." His apprehension of disaster to the cause from this class was great, but it was not greater than the reality, as the sequel abundantly proved. Let me not, however, anticipate.

If there were immense difficulties in the way of recruiting, there were even greater ones in the way of supplying the recruits with proper arms, or with any arms at all for that matter. But vast as were the difficulties, the leaders fronted them with buoyant and unquailing spirit, and rose, where other men of less faith and courage would have given up in despair, to the level of seeming impossibilities, and to the top of a truly appalling situation. Where were they, indeed, to procure arms? There was a blacksmith among them, who was set to manufacturing pike-heads and bayonets, and to turning long knives into daggers and dirks. Arms in the houses of the white folks they designed to borrow after the manner of the Jews from the Egyptians. But for their main supply they counted confidently upon the successful seizure, by means of preconcerted movements, of the principal places of deposit of arms within the limits of the city, of which there were several. The capture of these magazines and storehouses was quite within the range of probability, for every one of them was at the time in a comparatively unprotected state. Two large gun and powder stores, situated about three and a half miles beyond the Lines, and containing nearly eight hundred muskets and bayonets, were, by arrangement with Negro employees connected with them, at the mercy of the insurgents whenever they were ready to move upon them. The large building in the city, where was deposited the greater portion of the arms of the State, was strangely neglected in the same regard. Its main entrance, opening on the street, consisted of ordinary wooden doors, without the interposition between them and the public of even a brick wall.

In the general plan of attack, the capture of this building, which held tactically the key to the defense of Charleston, in the event of a slave uprising, was assigned to Peter Poyas, the ablest of Vesey's lieutenants. Peter, probably disguised by means of false hair and whiskers, was at a given signal at midnight of the appointed day, to move suddenly with his band upon this important post. The difficulty of the undertaking lay in the vigilance of the sentinels doing a duty before this building, and its success depended upon Peter's ability to surprise

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and slay this man before he could sound the alarm. Peter was confident of his ability to kill the sentinel and capture the building, and I think that he had good ground for his confidence. In conversation with an anxious follower, who feared lest the watchfulness of the guard might defeat the attempt, Peter remarked that he "would advance a little distance ahead, and if he could only get a *grip at his throat he was a gone man*, for his sword was very sharp; he had sharpened it, and made it so sharp it had cut his finger." And as if to cast the last lingering doubt out of his disciple in regard to his (Peter's) ability to fix the sentinel, he showed him the bloody cut on his finger.

Other leaders, at the head of their respective bands, were at the same time, and from six different quarters, to attack the city, surprising and seizing all of its strategical points, and the buildings, where were deposited its arms and ammunition. A body of insurgent horse was, meanwhile, to keep the streets clear, cutting down without mercy all white persons, and suspected blacks, whom they might encounter, in order to prevent the whites from concentrating or spreading the alarm through the doomed town. Such was Denmark Vesey's masterly and merciless plan of campaign in bare outline for the capture of Charleston, a plan, which, with such a sagacious head as was Vesey, was entirely feasible, and which would have, undoubtedly, succeeded but for the happening of the unexpected at a critical stage of its execution. Against such an occurrence as was this one, no man in Vesey's situation, however supreme might have been his ability as a leader, could have completely provided. The element of treachery could not by any device have been wholly eliminated from his chapter of accidents and chances. To do what he set out to do, with the means at his disposition, Vesey had of necessity to take the tremendous risk of betrayal at the hand of some black traitor. It was, in reality, sad to relate his greatest risk, and became the one insurmountable barrier in the way of his final success.

Sunday at midnight of July 14, 1822, was fixed upon originally as the time for beginning his attack upon the city. But about the last of May, owing to indications that the plot had been discovered, he shortened the period of its preparation, and appointed instead midnight of Sunday, June 16th, of the same year. His reason for selecting the original date illustrates his careful and astute attention to details in making his plans. He had noted that the white population of Charleston was subject, to a certain extent, to regular tidal movements; that at one season of the year this movement was at high tide, and that at another it was at low tide. It was no great difficulty, under the circumstances, for a man like Denmark Vesey to forecast with reasonable accuracy these recurrent movements, and natural enough that he should have planned his attack with reference to them. And this was exactly what he did when he appointed July 14th as the original date for beginning the insurrection. At that time the city was less capable than at an earlier date to cope with a slave uprising, owing to the departure in large numbers from it, for summer resorts, of its wealthier classes.

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Again his selection of the first day of the week in both instances was equally the result of careful calculation on his part, as on that day large bodies of slaves from the adjacent plantations and islands were wont to visit the town without molestation, whereas on no other day could this have been done. Thus, without exciting alarm, did Vesey plan to introduce his Trojan horse or country bands into the city, where they were to be concealed until the hour for beginning the attack.

But the attack, carefully planned as it was, did not take place. For the thing which Peter Poyas feared, and had vainly endeavored to provide against, came to pass. One of those very "waiting men," for whom Peter entertained such deep distrust, and against whom he had raised his voice in sharp warning, betrayed to his master the plot, the secret of which had been communicated to him by an overzealous convert, whose discretion was shorter than his tongue. All this happened on the morning of the 30th of May, and by sunset of that day the secret was in possession of the authorities of the city. Precautionary measures were quickly taken by them to guard against surprise, and to discover the full extent of the intended uprising.

Luckily for the conspirators the information given by the traitor was vague and general. Nor was the city able to elicit from the informant of this man, who had been promptly arrested and subjected to examination, any disclosures of a more specific or satisfactory character. He was, in truth, in possession of but few particulars of the plot, and was therefore unable to give any greater definiteness to the government's stock of knowledge relative to the subject. Suspicion, however, lighted on Peter Poyas and Mingo Harth, one of Vesey's minor leaders. They were, thereupon apprehended, and their personal effects searched, but nothing was found to inculpate either, except an enigmatical letter not understood by the authorities at the time. This circumstance, coupled with the coolness and consummate acting of the pair of suspected leaders, perplexed and deceived the authorities to such a degree that they ordered the discharge of the prisoners. But the fright and anxiety of the city were not so readily got rid of. They held Charleston uneasy and apprehensive of danger, and so kept it suspicious and watchful.

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Things remained in this state of watchfulness anxiety, on both sides, for about a week. Vesey on his part remitted nothing of his preparations for the coming 16th of June, but pushed them if possible with increased vigor and secrecy. He held the while nocturnal meetings at his house on Bull street, where modified arrangements for the execution of his plans were broached and matured. How he dared at this juncture to incur such extreme hazard of detection, it is difficult to understand. But he and his confederates were men of the most



indomitable purpose, and took in the desperate circumstances, in which they were then placed, the most desperate chances. They had to. They could not do otherwise.

The city on its side, was listening during a part of this same week to a second confession of that poor fellow whose tongue had outmeasured his discretion. It was listening with reviving dread to the wild and incoherent disclosures of this man, whom it had flung into the black hole of the workhouse. There, crazed by misery and fear of death, he raved about a plot among the blacks to massacre the whites and to put the town to fire and pillage. This second installment of William Paul's excited disclosures, while it increased the sense of impending peril, did not put the government in better position to avert it. For groping in the dark still, it knew not yet where or whom to strike. But in this period of horrible suspense and uncertainty its suspicion fell on another one of Vesey's principal leaders. This time it was on Ned Bennett that the city's distrustful eye fastened. Like that game which children play where the object of search is hidden, and where the seekers as they approach near and yet nearer to the place of concealment, grow warm and then warmer, so was the city, in its terrible search for the source of its danger, growing hot and hotter. That was, indeed, a frightful moment for the conspirators when Ned Bennett became suspected. The city, as the children say in their game, was beginning to burn, for it seemed as if it must at the next move, thrust its iron hand into that underground world where the plot was hatching, and clutching the heart of the great enterprise, snatch it, conspiracy and conspirators, into the light of day. But it was at such a tremendous moment of danger, that the leaders, unawed by the imminency of discovery, took a step to throw the city off of their scent, so daring, dextrous and unexpected as to knock the breath out of us.

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Ned Bennett, whom the city was watching as a cat, before springing, watches a mouse, went voluntarily before the Intendant or Mayor of the city, and asked to be examined, if so be he was an object of suspicion to the authorities. Ned was so surprisingly cool and indifferent, and wore so naturally an air of conscious innocence, that the great man was again deceived, and the city was thus thrown a second time out of the course of its game. Ned's arrest and examination were postponed, as the authorities in their perplexity were afraid to take at the time any decisive action, lest it might prove premature and abortive. And so lying on its arms, the city waited and watched for fresh developments and disclosures, while the insurgent leaders, in their underground world watched warily too, and pushed forward with undiminished confidence their final preparations, when they would, out of the dark, strike suddenly their liberating and annihilating blow. This awful state of suspense, of the most watchful suspicion and anxiety on one side, and of wary and anxious preparations on the other, continued for about five or six days, when it was ended by a second act of treachery emanating from the distrusted class of "waiting men," whose highest aspirations did not seem to reach above their masters' cast off garments.

Unlike the first, the information furnished to the authorities by the second traitor, was not lacking in definiteness. For this fellow knew what he was talking about. He knew almost all of the leaders, and many particulars connected with the plot. The city was thus placed in possession of the secret. It knew now the names of the ringleaders. But confident, apparently, of its ability to throttle the intended insurrection, it allowed two days to pass and the 16th of June, without making any arrests. Cat-like it crouched ready to spring, while it followed the unconscious movements of the principal conspirators. For Vesey and his principal officers were at that time, ignorant of the second betrayal, and therefore of the fact that they were from the 14th of June at the mercy of the police. On Saturday night, June 15th, an incident occurred, however, which warned them that they were betrayed, and that disaster was close at hand. This incident revealed as by a flash of lightning the hopelessness of their position. On that day Vesey had instructed one of his aids, Jesse Blackwood, to go into the country in the evening for the purpose of preparing the plantation slaves to enter the city on the day following, which was Sunday, June 16th, the time fixed for beginning the insurrection. Jesse was unable to discharge this mission, either on Saturday night or Sunday morning, owing to the increased strength and vigilance of the city police and of its patrol guard. He had succeeded on Sunday morning in getting by two of their lines, but at the third line he was halted and turned back into the city. When this ominous fact was reported to the Old Chief, Vesey became very sorrowful. He and the other leaders must have instantly perceived that they were caught, as in a trap, and that the end was near. It was probably on this Sunday that they destroyed their papers, lists of names and other incriminating evidence. The shadow of the approaching catastrophe deepened and spread rapidly around and above them as they watched and waited helplessly under the huge asp of slavery, which enraged and now completely coiled, was about to strike. The stroke fell first on Peter, Rolla, Ned, and Batteau Bennett. The last, although but a boy of eighteen, was one of the most active of the younger leaders of the plot. Vesey was not captured until the fourth day afterward. So secret and profound had been his methods of operations in the underground world, that the early reports of his connection with the conspiracy, were generally discredited among the whites. Jesse Blackwood was taken the next day, and four days later, on June 27th, Monday Gell was arrested. Gullah Jack eluded the search of the police until July 5th, when he too was struck by the huge slave asp.

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In all, there were one hundred and thirty-one blacks arrested, sixty-seven convicted, thirty-five executed, and thirty-seven banished beyond the limits of the United States. Five of these last were of the class of suspects, whom it was thought best to get rid of. Of the whole number of convictions, not one belonged to the bands of either Vesey, or Peter, or Rolla, or

Ned, and but few to that of Gullah Jack's. Absolutely true did these five leaders prove to their vow of secrecy, and so died without betraying a single associate. This alas! cannot be said of Monday Gell, who brave and loyal as he was throughout the period of his arrest and trial, yet after sentence of death had been passed upon him, and under the influence of a terror-stricken companion, succumbed to temptation, and for the sake of life, consented to betray his followers. Denmark, Peter, Rolla, Ned, Batteau, and Jesse, were hanged together, July 2, 1822. Ten days later Gullah Jack suffered death on the gallows also. Upon an enormous gallows, erected on the lines near Charleston, twenty-two of the black martyrs to freedom were executed on the 22nd day of the same ill-starred month.

A curious circumstance connected with this plot was the high regard in which the insurgents were held by the whites. But instead of my own, I prefer to insert in this place the remarks of the slave judges on this head. In their story of the plot they observed: "The character and condition of most of the insurgents were such as rendered them objects the least liable to suspicion. It is a melancholy truth, that the general good conduct of all the leaders, except Gullah Jack, had secured to them not only the unlimited confidence of their owners, but they had been indulged in every comfort and allowed every privilege compatible with their situation in the community; and although Gullah Jack was not remarkable for the correctness of his deportment, he by no means sustained a bad character. But not only were the leaders of good character and much indulged by their owners, but this was generally the case with all who were convicted, many of them possessed the highest confidence of their owners, and not one of bad character."

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Comment on this significant fact is unnecessary. It contains a lesson and a warning which a fool need not err in reading and understanding. Oppression is a powder magazine exposed always to the danger of explosion from spontaneous combustion. *Verbum sat sapienti.*

Another curious circumstance connected with this history, was the trial and conviction of four white men, on indictments for attempting to incite the slaves to insurrection. They were each sentenced to fine and imprisonment, the fines ranging from \$100 to \$1,000, and the terms of imprisonment, from three to twelve months.

And now for the concluding act of this tragedy, for a final glance at four of its black heroes and martyrs as they appeared to the slave judges who tried them, and to whose hostile pen we are indebted for this last impressive picture of their courage, their fortitude and their greatness of soul. Here it is: "When Vesey was tried, he folded his arms and seemed to pay great attention to the testimony, given against him, but with his eyes fixed on the floor. In this situation he remained immovable, until the witnesses had been examined by the court, and cross-examined by his counsel, when he requested to be allowed to examine the witnesses himself. He at first questioned them in the dictatorial, despotic manner, in which he was probably accustomed to address them; but this not producing the desired effect, he questioned them with affected surprise and concern for bearing false testimony against him; still failing in his purpose, he then examined them strictly as to dates, but could not make them contradict themselves. The evidence being closed, he addressed the court at considerable length \* \* \* When he received his sentence the tears trickled down his cheeks."

I cannot, of course, speak positively respecting the exact nature of the thought or feeling which lay back of those sad tears. But of this I am confident that they were not produced by any weak or momentary fear of death, and I am equally sure that they were not caused by remorse for the part which he had taken, as chief of a plot to give freedom to his race. Perhaps they were wrung from him by the Judas-like ingratitude and treachery, which had brought his well-laid scheme to ruin. He was about to die, and it was Wrong not Right which with streaming eyes he saw triumphant. Perhaps, in that solemn moment, he remembered the time, years before, when he might have sailed for Africa, and there have helped to build, in freedom and security, an asylum for himself and people, where all of the glad dreams of his strenuous and stormy life might have been realized, and also how he had put behind him the temptation, "because" as he expressed it, "he wanted to stay and see what he could do for his fellow creatures in bondage." At the thought of it all, the triumph of slavery, the treachery of black men, the immedicable grief which arises from wasted labors and balked purposes, and widespreading failures, is it surprising that in that supreme moment hot tears gushed from the eyes of that stricken but lion-hearted man?

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But to return to the last picture of the martyrs before their judges: "Rolla when arraigned affected not to understand the charge against him, and when it was at his request further explained to him, assumed with wonderful adroitness, astonishment, and surprise. He was remarkable throughout his trial, for great presence of composure of mind. When he was informed he was convicted and was advised to prepare for death, though he had previously (but after his trial) confessed his guilt, he appeared perfectly confounded, but exhibited no signs of fear. In Ned's behavior there was nothing remarkable, but his countenance was stern and immovable, even whilst he was receiving the sentence of death; from his looks it was impossible to discover or conjecture what were his feelings. Not so with Peter, for in his countenance were strongly marked disappointed ambition, revenge, indignation, and an anxiety to know how far the discoveries had extended, and the same emotions were exhibited in his conduct. He did not appear to fear personal consequences, for his whole behavior indicated the reverse: but exhibited an evident anxiety for the success of their plan, in which his whole soul was embarked. His countenance and behavior were the same when he received his sentence, and his only words were on retiring, 'I suppose you'll let me see

my wife and family before I die,' and that not in a supplicating tone. When he was asked a day or two after, if it was possible he could wish to see his master and family murdered who had treated him so kindly, he only replied to the question by a smile."

The unquailing courage, the stern fidelity to engagements, and the spirit of devotion and self-sacrifice which characterized so signally the leaders of this slave plot, culminated, it seems to me, in the unbending will and grandeur of soul of Peter Poyas, during those last, tragic days, in Charleston. I doubt if in six thousand years the world has produced a finer example of fortitude and greatness of mind in presence of death, than did this Negro slave exhibit in the black hole of the Charleston workhouse, when conversing with his Chief and Rolla and Ned Bennett, touching their approaching death, and the safety of their faithful and forlorn followers, he uttered thus intrepid injunction: "Do not open your lips! Die silent as you shall see me do." Such words, considering the circumstances under which they were spoken, were worthy of a son of Sparta or of Rome, when Sparta and Rome were at their highest levels as breeders of iron men.

It is verily no light thing for the Negroes of the United States to have produced such a man, such a hero and martyr. It is certainly no light heritage, the knowledge, that his brave blood flows in their veins. For history does not record, that any other of its long and shining line of heroes and martyrs, ever met death, anywhere on this globe, in a holier cause or a sublimer mood, than died this Spartan-like slave, more than three quarters of a century ago.

May some future Rembrandt have the courage, as the genius, to paint that tragic and imposing scene, with its deep shadows and high lights as I see it now, the dark and hideous dungeon, the sombre figures and grim faces of the four glorious black martyrs, with Peter in the midst, speaking his deathless words: "Do not open your lips! Die silent as you shall see me do."

"Right forever on the scaffold,  
Wrong forever on the Throne,  
Yet that scaffold sways the future,  
And, behind the dim unknown,  
Standeth God within the shadow,  
Keeping watch above His own."

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