XIV

The Sorrow Songs

I walk through the churchyard
To lay this body down;
I know moon-rise, I know star-rise;
I walk in the moonlight, I walk in the starlight;
I'll lie in the grave and stretch out my arms,
I'll go to judgment in the evening of the day,
And my soul and thy soul shall meet that day,
When I lay this body down.

NEGRO SONG.

They that walked in darkness sang songs in the olden days—Sorrow Songs—for they were weary at heart. And so before each thought that I have written in this book I have set a phrase, a haunting echo of these weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men. Ever since I was a child these songs have stirred me strangely. They came out of the South unknown to me, one by one, and yet at once I knew them as of me and of mine. Then in after years when I came to Nashville I saw the great temple built of these songs towering over the pale city. To me Jubilee Hall seemed ever made of the songs themselves, and its bricks were red with the blood and dust of toil. Out of them rose for me morning, noon, and night, bursts of wonderful melody, full of the voices of my brothers and sisters, full of the voices of the past.

Little of beauty has America given the world save the rude grandeur God himself stamped on her bosom; the human spirit in this new world has expressed itself in vigor and ingenuity rather than in beauty. And so by fateful chance the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.

Away back in the thirties the melody of these slave songs stirred the nation, but the songs were soon half forgotten. Some, like “Near the lake where drooped the willow,” passed into current airs and their source was forgotten; others were caricatured on the “minstrel” stage and their memory died away. Then in war-time came the singular Port Royal experiment after the capture of Hilton Head, and perhaps for the first time the North met the Southern slave face to face and heart to heart with no third witness. The Sea Islands of the Carolinas, where they met, were filled with a black folk of primitive type, touched and moulded less by the world about them than any others outside the Black Belt. Their appearance was uncouth, their language funny, but their hearts were human and their singing stirred men with a mighty power. Thomas Wentworth Higginson hastened to tell of these songs, and Miss McKim and others urged upon the world their rare beauty. But the world listened only half credulously until the Fisk Jubilee Singers sang the slave songs so deeply into the world’s heart that it can never wholly forget them again.

There was once a blacksmith’s son born at Cadiz, New York, who in the changes of time taught school in Ohio and helped defend Cincinnati from Kirby Smith. Then he fought at Chancellorsville and Gettysburg and finally served in the Freedman’s Bureau at Nashville. Here he formed a Sunday-school class of black children in 1866, and sang with them and taught them to sing. And then they taught him to sing, and when once the glory of the Jubilee songs passed into the soul of George L. White, he knew his life-work was to let those Negroes sing to the world as they had sung to him. So in 1871 the pilgrimage of the Fisk Jubilee Singers began. North to Cincinnati they rode,—four half-clothed black boys and five girl-women,—led by a man with a cause and a purpose. They stopped at Wilberforce, the oldest of Negro schools, where a black bishop blessed them. Then they went, fighting cold and
starvation, shut out of hotels, and cheerfully sneered at, ever northward; and ever the magic of their song kept thrilling hearts, until a burst of applause in the Congregational Council at Oberlin revealed them to the world. They came to New York and Henry Ward Beecher dared to welcome them, even though the metropolitan dailies sneered at his "Nigger Minstrels." So their songs conquered till they sang across the land and across the sea, before Queen and Kaiser, in Scotland and Ireland, Holland and Switzerland. Seven years they sang, and brought back a hundred and fifty thousand dollars to found Fisk University.

Since their day they have been imitated—sometimes well, by the singers of Hampton and Atlanta, sometimes ill, by straggling quartettes. Caricature has sought again to spoil the quaint beauty of the music, and has filled the air with many debased melodies which vulgar ears scarce know from the real. But the true Negro folk-song still lives in the hearts of those who have heard them truly sung and in the hearts of the Negro people.

What are these songs, and what do they mean? I know little of music and can say nothing in technical phrase, but I know something of men, and knowing them, I know that these songs are the articulate message of the slave to the world. They tell us in these days that life was joyous to the black slave, careless and happy. I can easily believe this of some, of many. But not all the past South, though it rose from the dead, can gainsay the heart-touching witness of these songs. They are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways.

The songs are indeed the sitings of centuries; the music is far more ancient than the words, and in it we can trace here and there signs of development. My grandfather's grandmother was seized by an evil Dutch trader two centuries ago; and coming to the valleys of the Hudson and Housatonic, black, little, and lithe, she shivered and shrank in the harsh north winds, looked longingly at the hills, and often crooned a heathen melody to the child between her knees, thus:

The child sang it to his children and they to their children's children, and so two hundred years it has travelled down to us and we sing it to our children, knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music.

This was primitive African music; it may be seen in larger form in the strange chant which heralds "The Coming of John":

"You may bury me in the East,
You may bury me in the West,
But I'll hear the trumpet sound in that morning."

—the voice of exile.

Ten master songs, more or less, one may pluck from this forest of melody—songs of undoubted Negro origin and wide popular currency, and songs peculiarly characteristic of the slave. One of these I have just mentioned. Another whose strains begin this book is "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen." When, struck with a sudden poverty, the United States refused to fulfill its promises of land to the freedmen, a brigadier-general went down to the Sea Islands to carry the news. An old woman on the outskirts of the throng began singing this song; all the mass joined with her, swaying. And the soldier wept.

The third is the cradle-song of death which all men know,—"Swing low, sweet chariot,"—whose bars begin the life story of "Alexander Crummell." Then there is the song of
many waters, “Roll, Jordan, roll,” a mighty chorus with min-
ner cadences. There were many songs of the fugitive like that
which opens “The Wings of Atalanta,” and the more familiar
“Been a-listening.” The seventh is the song of the End and
the Beginning—“My Lord, what a mourning! when the
stars begin to fall”; a strain of this is placed before “The
Dawn of Freedom.” The song of groping—“My way’s
cloudy”—begins “The Meaning of Progress”; the ninth is
the song of this chapter—“Wrestlin’ Jacob, the day is a-
breaking,”—a paean of hopeful strife. The last master song is
the song of songs—“Steal away,”—sprung from “The Faith
of the Fathers.”

There are many others of the Negro folk-songs as striking
and characteristic as these, as, for instance, the three strains in
the third, eighth, and ninth chapters; and others I am sure
could easily make a selection on more scientific principles.
There are, too, songs that seem to me a step removed from
the more primitive types: there is the maze-like medley,
“Bright sparkles,” one phrase of which heads “The Black
Belt”; the Easter carol, “Dust, dust and ashes”; the dirge,
“My mother’s took her flight and gone home”; and that burst
of melody hovering over “The Passing of the First-Born”—“I
hope my mother will be there in that beautiful world on high.”

These represent a third step in the development of the slave
song, of which “You may bury me in the East” is the first,
and songs like “March on” (chapter six) and “Steal away” are
the second. The first is African music, the second Afro-Amer-
ican, while the third is a blending of Negro music with the
music heard in the foster land. The result is still distinctively
Negro and the method of blending original, but the elements
are both Negro and Caucasian. One might go further and
find a fourth step in this development, where the songs of
white America have been distinctly influenced by the slave
songs or have incorporated whole phrases of Negro melody,
as “Swanee River” and “Old Black Joe.” Side by side, too,
with the growth has gone the debasements and imitations—
the Negro “minstrel” songs, many of the “gospel” hymns, and
some of the contemporary “coon” songs,—a mass of music
in which the novice may easily lose himself and never find the
real Negro melodies.

In these songs, I have said, the slave spoke to the world.
Such a message is naturally veiled and half articulate. Words
and music have lost each other and new and cant phrases of
a dimly understood theology have displaced the older senti-
ment. Once in a while we catch a strange word of an un-
known tongue, as the “Mighty Myo,” which figures as a river
of death; more often slight words or mere doggerel are joined
to music of singular sweetness. Purely secular songs are few
in number, partly because many of them were turned into
hymns by a change of words, partly because the frolics were
seldom heard by the stranger, and the music less often caught.
Of nearly all the songs, however, the music is distinctly sor-
rowful. The ten master songs I have mentioned tell in word
and music of trouble and exile, of strife and hiding; they
prope toward some unseen power and sigh for rest in the
End.

The words that are left to us are not without interest, and,
cleared of evident dross, they conceal much of real poetry
and meaning beneath conventional theology and unmeaning
rhapsody. Like all primitive folk, the slave stood near to Na-
ture’s heart. Life was a “rough and rolling sea” like the
brown Atlantic of the Sea Islands; the “Wilderness” was the
home of God, and the “lonesome valley” led to the way of
life. “Winter’ll soon be over,” was the picture of life and
death to a tropical imagination. The sudden wild thunder-
storms of the South awed and impressed the Negroes,—at
times the rumbling seemed to them “mournful,” at times
imperious:

“My Lord calls me,
He calls me by the thunder,
The trumpet sounds it in my soul.”

The monotonous toil and exposure is painted in many
words. One sees the ploughmen in the hot, moist furrow,
singing:

“Dere’s no rain to wet you,
Dere’s no sun to burn you,
Oh, push along, believer,
I want to go home.”
The bowed and bent old man cries, with thrice-repeated wail:

"O Lord, keep me from sinking down,"
and he rebukes the devil of doubt who can whisper:

"Jesus is dead and God 's gone away."

Yet the soul-hunger is there, the restlessness of the savage, the wail of the wanderer, and the plaint is put in one little phrase:

My soul wants something that's new, that's new.

Over the inner thoughts of the slaves and their relations one with another the shadow of fear ever hung, so that we get but glimpses here and there, and also with them, eloquent omissions and silences. Mother and child are sung, but seldom father; fugitive and weary wanderer call for pity and affection, but there is little of wooing and wedding; the rocks and the mountains are well known, but home is unknown. Strange blending of love and helplessness sings through the refrain:

"Yonder 's my ole mudder,  
Been waggin' at de hill so long;  
'Bout time she cross over,  
Git home bime-by."

Elsewhere comes the cry of the "motherless" and the "Farewell, farewell, my only child."

Love-songs are scarce and fall into two categories—the frivolous and light, and the sad. Of deep successful love there is ominous silence, and in one of the oldest of these songs there is a depth of history and meaning:

Poor Rosy, poor gal; Poor Rosy,

A black woman said of the song, "It can't be sung without a full heart and a troubled sperrit." The same voice sings here that sings in the German folk-song:

"Jetz Geh i an's brunele, trink' aber net."

Of death the Negro showed little fear, but talked of it familiarly and even fondly as simply a crossing of the waters, perhaps—who knows?—back to his ancient forests again. Later days transfigured his fatalism, and amid the dust and dirt the toiler sang:

"Dust, dust and ashes, fly over my grave,  
But the Lord shall bear my spirit home."

The things evidently borrowed from the surrounding world undergo characteristic change when they enter the mouth of the slave. Especially is this true of Bible phrases. "Weep, O captive daughter of Zion," is quaintly turned into "Zion, weep-a-low," and the wheels of Ezekiel are turned every way in the mystic dreaming of the slave, till he says:

"There 's a little wheel a-turnin' in-a my heart."

As in olden time, the words of these hymns were improvised by some leading minstrel of the religious band. The circumstances of the gathering, however, the rhythm of the songs, and the limitations of allowable thought, confined the poetry for the most part to single or double lines, and they seldom were expanded to quatrains or longer tales, although there are some few examples of sustained efforts, chiefly paraphrases of the Bible. Three short series of verses have always attracted me,—the one that heads this chapter, of one line of which Thomas Wentworth Higginson has fittingly said, "Never, it seems to me, since man first lived and suffered was..."
his infinite longing for peace uttered more plaintively."
The second and third are descriptions of the Last Judgment,—the one a late improvisation, with some traces of outside influence:

"Oh, the stars in the elements are falling,
And the moon drips away into blood,
And the ransom of the Lord are returning unto God,
Blessed be the name of the Lord."

And the other earlier and homelier picture from the low coast lands:

"Michael, haul the boat ashore,
Then you'll hear the horn they blow,
Then you'll hear the trumpet sound,
Trumpet sound the world around,
Trumpet sound for rich and poor,
Trumpet sound the Jubilee,
Trumpet sound for you and me."

Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins. Is such a hope justified? Do the Sorrow Songs sing true?

The silently growing assumption of this age is that the probation of races is past, and that the backward races of to-day are of proven inefficiency and not worth the saving. Such an assumption is the arrogance of peoples irreverent toward Time and ignorant of the deeds of men. A thousand years ago such an assumption, easily possible, would have made it difficult for the Teuton to prove his right to life. Two thousand years ago such dogmatism, readily welcome, would have scouted the idea of blond races ever leading civilization. So woefully unorganized is sociological knowledge that the meaning of progress, the meaning of "swift" and "slow" in human
and mortar below—swelling with song, instinct with life, tremulous treble and darkening bass. My children, my little children, are singing to the sunshine, and thus they sing:

And the traveller girds himself, and sets his face toward the Morning, and goes his way.