

August, 1937

239

# Up From Slavery\*

**W**RITERS in search of stories of opportunity in our American democracy are wont to turn to the pioneer log cabin, New York's lower east side, or to Ellis Island for examples. But we have here in Grinnell, Iowa, a success story at our very doors as shown by the story of Edith Renfrow.

On commencement day this year at Grinnell College this girl, slight of figure and lithe of gait, received from President John Scholte Nollen the degree which marks the culmination of four hard years of struggle during which she earned her entire way through college, stood well above the average in scholarship, and overcame a prejudice as common and widespread as our country itself. For Miss Renfrow is Grinnell's only colored student, thrown in with young people drawn from all parts of the country, many cherishing the traditions of the South and of border states. Moreover Edith is the fifth of six children to graduate from an institution of higher education, while a sixth is now studying at Howard University, Washington, D. C.

The story of this family, descended from a French planter of South Carolina and one of his slaves, the latter being given her freedom only to be sold again into slavery; her separation from her three children, the adventures of the three in search of an education, and the passion for learning that they passed on to their children, contains many of the elements of romance.

Miss Renfrow's parents are both of substantial stuff. Modest in telling their story, they showed surprise that anyone should regard it as at all noteworthy. "My father was a pretty hard man," mused Mr. Renfrow, "and I was a high-spirited young fellow. Once he beat me up worse than common and I lit out and never went back. I got along somehow doing odd jobs to keep alive until a man named Porterfield got interested in me. His father had been a redhot abolitionist before the war; he had helped operate an underground railway in Illinois. He took me into his own home, almost like an adopted son, and I grew up under his care. I guess that's what got me into good habits and kept me straight later on. In those days there were lots of temptations in the way of young fellows.

"There certainly were," put in Mrs. Renfrow. Then she went on to tell of

*The descendant of a slave mother and a French master gets her degree at a middle western college*



MISS EDITH RENFROW

her own origin. "My grandmother was a slave," she began, "owned by a French planter in South Carolina. This man, Gilbelle—my mother used to spell it Jillbell—never married. Instead he grew to love one of his slave girls, my grandmother, and in time made her mistress of his house, treating her with honor and affection. When children came he accepted them as his own and gave them every advantage, even planning for their complete education by a clause in his will."

Because there were no schools at that time for Negroes in the South, explained Mrs. Renfrow, the two older children were sent away into Ohio to what is now Wilberforce university. During his last sickness the planter had given his slave mistress her freedom and told her to take little Eliza Jane, her youngest and Mrs. Renfrow's mother, to join her other children in Ohio. The slave woman refused to leave the sick man, giving her little girl instead into the hands of a man who was emigrating into Ohio, with instructions to turn her over to a Quaker lady there who was to be paid to care for her until she was old enough to go to Wilberforce.

## Back into Slavery

"My grandmother stood and watched the covered wagon drive away," continued Mrs. Renfrow, "taking her baby girl. She never saw her children again. For on the death of her master, his brothers, who had no patience with his ideas, burned my grandmother's writ of freedom before her eyes and forced her back into slavery, dividing their brother's estate among themselves. Years later when the three children were grown, they sent an attorney back to South Carolina to try to collect a part of their father's estate. He not only failed to collect, but was warned to clear out in a hurry. He gathered the story from the neighbors just as I have told it to you."

In Ohio ill fate soon overtook the orphaned children. When the Civil War cut off all remittances from the South the career of the two older children was cut off with it; they were compelled to leave Wilberforce and scratch for what living they got. The Quaker lady to whom had been entrusted the care of little Eliza Jane exploited the child, and when remittances ceased, reduced her to the status of a little slavey.

Stories of her cruelty finally reached the ears of a kindly woman, also a Quaker, who got possession of the child, brought her up in her own home, and in due time sent her to be educated at Wilberforce. Some years later, tempted by stories of the fertility of land beyond the Mississippi, she migrated, in the customary covered wagon of the day, to Iowa, taking Eliza Jane with her. There, in due time, Eliza Jane was married to a young man not to the taste of her benefactress, who, irritated by her young ward's choice of a mate, cut her off without a cent of a long-promised dowry.

The children who came to this marriage imbibed their mother's devotion to learning. Eliza Jane had taught school before her marriage; what more natural than that her daughters should also aspire to teach? "I got a position teaching in a rural school in Missouri," explained Mrs. Renfrow, "and later in Leavenworth, Kansas; both on the slender preparation of two years in high school. But our family was poor, and I had to quit school and go to work. Afterward I married, and my children have been getting what I longed for but missed, a thorough education."

(Continued on next page)

\*With apologies to the publishers of Booker T. Washington's famous autobiography.

### Struggle for Education

The story of the struggle of these six young people for the schooling which was with them a consuming passion is one of incessant toil, sacrifice, and aid to one another. Of the four girls Helen, firstborn, has a degree from the University of Iowa and lives, married, in the university town of Iowa City. Alice is a graduate of Hampton Institute, Virginia, and is now a filing clerk in the Congressional Library at Washington. Evanel, B.S. University of Iowa in home economics, later earned a master of arts degree at the same institution and is now college dietitian at Florida State college at Tallahassee, while Edith will receive her degree from Grinnell college this month. Rudolph, who remained in high school long enough to become famous in interscholastic football and track, later went to Hampton Institute where he became valedictorian in a graduating class of 133 students. His mother explained that he chose Hampton in order to obtain vocational training whereby he might aid his sisters to go to college. How effectively he did this even during the summer vacations at Hampton is shown by his earnings of \$50 a week as a stone mason in New York City. He is now salesman for an investors' syndicate in Washington, D. C., and adviser to the youngest Renfrow, Paul, who works in a government building by day and attends Howard university after working hours.

Perhaps most noteworthy is the way the young Renfrows, after struggling to get their own education, turned about to aid the others. Now the five are joining to help Edith.

So through hardship and self-denial have these six descendants of a slave girl and her French master made places for themselves. Exceptional qualities must have been prominent in that young slave to have won the enduring devotion of her master. For only by flying in the face of intrenched custom did he elevate her to the headship of his house. A nice question arises as to the share of heredity and environment in the making of these four generations. Was it inheritance of sterling qualities from that first mating in South Carolina, or the stimulating effect of abolitionist ideals and Quaker traditions along the way? Edith Renfrow, who is a major in psychology at Grinnell, and who plans already to earn her master's degree in social work, probably has her opinion, but isn't telling. But Mrs. Renfrow, herself a devout Quaker, harbors no doubts. "No honor to us," she says in a reverent tone, "but to God all the glory!"

L  
g  
la  
Jo  
19  
D  
ol  
si

L  
C  
ba  
li  
to  
un  
M  
vi  
si  
ho  
er  
m

ni  
sc  
er  
w  
M  
da  
le  
re  
L  
w  
N  
w  
of  
le  
ac  
as