

## THE NEGRO AS A SOLDIER.

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WHEN the war-cloud burst upon the country in 1861, the great uprising of the North recked little of the millions throughout the Southern States held in the cruelest bondage.

The universal feeling in the loyal States, from the President in the White House to the proletariat of the great cities, was that the Union was in danger and threatened with disruption. If the negro was thought of at all, it was only as the firebrand that had caused the conflagration, the accursed thing that had created enmity and bitterness between the two sections, and excited the fratricidal strife. The few, here and there, who in prophetic vision saw that the war between the States must eventually lead to the abolition of slavery, hardly dared to declare their vision, or believed it better to accept the enthusiasm of the people and the war spirit abroad in the land, under whatever theory it had come into existence, without question or cavil, sure that, under the Power that works for righteousness, it would be turned to the best account; and willing to wait in patience for the coming of what they so long had hoped, — the acceptable year of the Lord, when the fetters would fall from the slave, and the land be cleansed of its sin.

Almost no one, even among those who had been the most steadfast friends of the down-trodden race, believed in the capacity of the negro to meet his master on any equal footing, — least of all, on the field of battle. For so many years had the black man cowered beneath the

lash of the oppressor, that his spirit was thought by all to have been crushed ; and a deed of heroism by him, except of the passive and suffering kind, was beyond the faith even of the Abolitionist.

True, it was not remembered that in all the wars of our country, waged upon and in defence of our own soil, the negro had shown that he was able to bear arms and was willing to fight ; that, strange as it would seem, patriotism burned in his heart, though he was looked upon and treated as only a chattel ; that at Bunker Hill, shoulder to shoulder with the white embattled farmers, the free negro had stood and borne his part ; that at New Orleans, in the War of 1812, Jackson had invoked, and been aided by, the patriotism of negro soldiers, and that the black man had always served in our navy on an equal footing with the white boys in blue. No one turned back the pages of history and recalled the story of the heroism and courage and military success of the blacks of Hayti when, under the generalship of Toussaint L'Ouverture, they defeated the heroes of Hohenlinden, the flower of the French army, and won for their leader the title of the Black Napoleon, with freedom and independence for themselves.

But if the Northern people, in their political blindness, failed to perceive the millions of recruits that might be gained to the cause of the nation from the enslaved race, that race itself seems never to have faltered in its faith that the result of victory to the North would bring to it enfranchisement. The negroes knew, as if by intuition, that their fate hung on the success of the Union cause ; and they waited in patience, and with prayers, ever ready for the day of jubilee. It is to their undying honor and credit that they did thus patiently wait ; no servile uprising, no barbarous slaughter of women and children in the rear of the Confederate forces, tarnished the good name of the enslaved ; and their first acts of hostility to their masters, and service to the government of the country,

were under the flag of that country when called upon by its highest authority to take arms for its defence. Not till the muskets of the Federal Government were placed in their hands did they presume to meet their rebellious masters in war ; but then they shrank not from any duty which a brave soldier should perform.

The negro was recognized as a possible military factor in the war, by the South far earlier than by the North ; and to his master the objection to arming him seems to have been that even by the Southerner it was recognized that military service must entitle the servant to emancipation, rather than any doubt as to his capacity to bear arms and do good service.

The editor of the "*Intelligencer and Confederacy*," a paper published in Georgia, as quoted in the "*Nashville Union*," May 24, 1862, says : "We must fight the devil with fire, by arming our negroes to fight the Yankees. There is no doubt that in Georgia alone we could pick up ten thousand negroes who would rejoice in meeting fifteen thousand Yankees in deadly conflict. We would be willing almost to risk the fate of the South upon such an encounter in an open field" (*Rebellion Record*, vol. v. page 22).

In the latter part of April, 1861, a negro company at Nashville, Tennessee, offered its services to the Confederate Government, and a recruiting office was opened for free negroes at Memphis (*Charleston Mercury*, April 30, 1861).

On the 23d of November, 1861, at a grand review of the Confederate troops stationed at New Orleans, a feature of the review was one regiment of fourteen hundred free colored men ; and of a later review, the "*New Orleans Picayune*," February 9, 1862, said : "We must also pay a deserved compliment to the companies of free colored men, all very well drilled and comfortably uniformed. Most of these companies, quite unaided by the Administration, have supplied themselves with arms without

soldiers, who were in perfect line of battle, firing regularly and effectively; and the captain rode back to his general and reported that "The regiment is holding dress-parade over there under fire."

These instances, all well authenticated, should satisfy any one that the negro troops, recruited and organized by the Government to aid in the suppression of the Rebellion, were fully as capable as the troops of other races to perform all the duties of soldiers. If in some respects the inferiors of the white volunteers, and from their long-continued servitude and lack of education naturally inferior to the educated white citizens of the North, yet in other respects they were, from that very inferiority, better fitted to fill the ranks of a regiment as part of that complicated human machine called an army. In physical bravery, steadiness under fire, and discipline to do what was ordered without question, they were certainly, when decently officered, equal to any troops which the Civil War produced, short of those organizations in which the high state of educated intelligence had actually created the spirit which would refuse to criticise, and took a pride in absolute obedience to orders, because the reason had first decided that a soldier never should do anything but obey.

The cases I have cited are but some of the many in which our colored volunteers played a most honorable part, and, though it would not be true to say that they always behaved well, yet the occasions in which they did not do as well as they ought to have done are not proportionately more numerous than those when white soldiers have failed; and I believe there was no occasion on which they were smitten as a body with a panic like that unreasoning panic of the Eleventh Corps at Chancellorsville, or that of the army in general at the first battle of Bull Run.

Finally, the fact that ever since the Rebellion there have been four regiments of negroes, two of cavalry and two of infantry, constantly in the service of the Govern-

ment, forming part of the regular army, is perhaps the best answer that can be given to any one who doubts their capacity as soldiers. During all the four years of the war, the regular regiments were considered the choicest troops of the Union, and the greatest praise that could be given to a volunteer regiment was to compare it favorably with a regiment of regulars; yet the standard of intelligence was probably in few volunteer organizations not very much above that of the regulars. I am informed by those who have had full opportunity of judging, and who ought to know, that the negro regiments of the army, since the Rebellion, have borne a creditable, and in many cases a gallant part, in the services which our little army has been called upon to perform, that they serve in conjunction with the white troops without trouble, and that their officers make no objections to commanding them because of the color of their skins. It is safe to say that they will always henceforth be accepted as soldiers, and will continue to form a part of the forces on which the nation depends. In the words of General Duncan, who had known and commanded negroes, and knew their soldierly qualities, —

"It is my verdict, and I believe that you will all coincide with me, that the colored troops deserved well of the Republic; and when the artist-historian of the coming age shall seek to represent in enduring marble or bronze the magnificent events of the period of the Great Rebellion, high among the crowning figures of the structure will he uprear a full-armed statue of a negro soldier, and the Muse of History, with truthful pen, shall inscribe at the front of that statue the legend: 'The colored troops fought nobly.'"