MARY McLEOD BETHUNE

Emma Gelders Sterne

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Mary McLeod Bethune, circa 1905

MARY McLEOD BETHUNE

by Emma Gelders Sterne
illustrated by Raymond Lufkin

Purple House Press
Kentucky

TO

the young people of the South,

who hold history in their joined hands.

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FOREWORD

Before becoming a mother, I had little interest in history. It was a subject that bored me in school and for which I had no concern as an adult. I didn't see the relevancy of the endless lists of battles, generals, places, and random dates that I'd been expected to memorize and regurgitate for exams, and I was happy to be free from the requirement to endure pages upon pages of historical blather. But as a dutiful home educator, I knew that teaching history was something I ought to do, and I was determined to find the least painful method to explore the required lessons with my children.

As our journey began, I sought the counsel of experienced parents and educators who believed in a different way of unfolding the story of the world to their children. And through them, I found terrific recommendations for intriguing picture books, fascinating chronological accounts, compelling historical fiction, and immersive biographies. These books were nothing like the dry texts doled out to me as a schoolgirl, and the more I read them with my children, the more immersed we became. Through stories, we befriended heroes and ordinary folks from the past, and to my surprise, history quickly rose as one of the most beloved subjects in our home.

But as much as we sought to learn all we could about inspiring people set in different times and places, there was always a nagging feeling that certain voices were missing. Where were the stories about women who had sacrificed to impart change for themselves and those around them? Why weren't we hearing about the ingenuity and wisdom of women who "made a way out of no way" even in the face of sexism, racism, oppression, and sometimes violence? What about the mothers, wives, intellects, teachers, healers, and thinkers whose actions always seemed to remain hidden behind a curtain of silence?

As much as we enjoyed our historical studies, I knew that what I was serving up in our home was woefully incomplete. My children needed to hear from the unheard. And to be honest, I needed to hear from them too. So I prioritized women's voices throughout history as we examined what they endured and contributed to the world. And as an African American family, we began to take special notice of Black women who took up the charge and courageously forged ahead in the face of unimaginable adversity.

The more I researched, the more I uncovered, but one name continually rose to the top: Mary McLeod Bethune. As a passionate and committed educator and leader, Bethune forged paths that led her from working in cotton fields to founding a school (now known as Bethune-Cookman University) to advocating for Black people at the highest level of government as an advisor to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. She traveled to every corner of our country and visited homes "both lowly and luxurious" to work toward her dream of full equality for all. Bethune repeatedly endured reprehensible hardships yet persevered and consistently bloomed wherever she was planted. She is a role model whom all our children can admire and learn from, and in this age of increasing derision and strife, we need stories like hers more than ever.

In 1957, Emma Gelders Sterne, a white woman and staunch advocate for social and civil rights, wrote a beautiful biography simply entitled *Mary McLeod Bethune*. In it, she shares the story of Bethune's life from childhood until her last days, including the tragedies and triumphs she experienced along the way. Sterne's well-researched text has now been republished for today's children to glean all they can from Bethune's example, and it is my sincere hope that your family or students will appreciate her voice and legacy.

In this revised edition, you'll find most of the author's original language, along with minor updates that help bring the story

forward to our 21st-century children. The changes made are inconsequential to the narrative and are included to show respect to all persons while preventing young readers from becoming distracted by the repetitive use of outdated racial language. However, several terms that are considered unacceptable or even inexcusable today, including "negro," "colored," and "nigger" have remained intact in instances where removing or changing them would materially alter the intent of the speaker. At other times, they've been preserved because they constitute the actual name of an organization.

Along with modernization of the racial language, some trivial thoughts and behaviors deemed inconsequential to Bethune's story have been revised to avoid unnecessary negative influences on the many children reading this book. Examples include quick mentions of smoking tobacco, objectifying women based on their looks, and insensitive references to people experiencing mental health challenges. Having read both the original and revised texts, I can state with confidence that the complete integrity of the book, including the details of Bethune's life and the author's original intent, has been artfully maintained.

Towards the end of her life, Bethune wrote, "I leave you love. I leave you hope. I leave you the challenge of developing confidence in one another. I leave you respect for the use of power. I leave you faith. I leave you racial dignity. I leave you a desire to live harmoniously with your fellow men. I leave you finally, a responsibility to our young people."

It is in this spirit, with Mary McLeod Bethune's dreams and wishes in the forefront, that Purple House Press and I present her story to a new generation of readers, listeners, and doers.

Amber O'Neal Johnston
HeritageMom.com
November, 2021

INTRODUCTION

I FIRST MET Mary McLeod Bethune in the summer of 1921 in Atlanta, Georgia. She was presiding over an important meeting of Negro club women and I was an eleven-year-old youngster working at odd jobs around the YMCA where the meeting was held. She immediately captivated me. She was especially wonderful with young people. Her charm, her wit and humor, her oratory, and her indefinable quality of leadership—all these combined to make a powerful impact on those who came to know her.

All of her life Mrs. Bethune was concerned mostly with young people. She founded Bethune-Cookman College where she was eternally busy helping the students develop their minds and their hearts. During the feverish days of the National Youth Administration she was binding up the sore wounds of despair and frustration that years of depression had inflicted on young spirits. And, finally, in her devoted service to her country and the United Nations she was looking down the long corridor of the future trying as best she could to make some contribution to the betterment of the world in which young people would live and work, and grow to maturity.

While the story of a Negro woman rising from the cotton fields of South Carolina to prominent world posts and overcoming many handicaps is a tribute to her own courage and perseverance and faith, it is also a heartwarming story of what can happen in a democracy. In Mrs. Bethune's lifetime significant forward progress in human relations can be chronicled. This is important for young people to know when there is such

competition in the world for the minds of men. The competing ideologies present their wares for all to see and the story of Mary McLeod Bethune is one of America's significant exhibits.

Mrs. Sterne has captured the essence of Mary McLeod Bethune in this delightful book. The life of this woman is a story that needed telling at this time. For the thousands who did not, and now cannot, know her at first hand the book, *Mary McLeod Bethune*, helps fill the void.

WILLIAM J. TRENT, JR.
Executive Director
United Negro College Fund

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

FOR THE FACTS and background of Mrs. Bethune's life history, I have drawn on published sources too numerous to list, but I feel that mention should be made of Mrs. Bethune's columns in the Chicago *Defender* and the Pittsburgh *Courier,* her articles in the *Journal of Negro History* and the *Negro History Bulletin,* and her essay in the volume *What the Negro Wants,* published by the University of North Carolina Press.

Still, for a stranger—an outsider—to tell the story of Mary McLeod Bethune would have been impossible without the generous assistance of her friends and fellow workers in the educational world, in the National Youth Administration, and in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Association of Negro Women, and the National Council of Negro Women. I am indebted to the many people who drew on their store of memories to help me prepare this record of a remarkable woman, and to those who have read the book in manuscript.

Special thanks are due Miss Ella Baker of the Manhattan Branch of the NAACP; Mrs. Esther Bernhart; Dr. L. S. Cozart, President of Barber-Scotia College; Mr. W. C. Ervin, Business Manager of Paine College; Dr. Clark Foreman; Dr. Carleton Goodlett; Mr. Noah Griffin, Field Secretary of the NAACP; Mrs. Mame Mason Higgins, former Dean of Women at Bethune-Cookman College; Mrs. Inez Jackson; Dr. Marguerite Johnson, of the staff of the New York City Board of Education; Mr. John Killens, author of *Youngblood*; Miss Louise Laney; Mr. Edward R. Rodriquez, Director of Mary McLeod Bethune Foundation; Mrs. Charlemae Rollins, Children's Librarian at the Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library; Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt; Mr. William J. Trent, Jr., Executive Director of the United Negro College Fund; Mr.

Aubrey Williams; Mr. Ernest Wilkins, Assistant Secretary of Labor; Mr. Henry Winslow, teacher and literary critic for *The Crisis;* Mr. Rollins Winslow.

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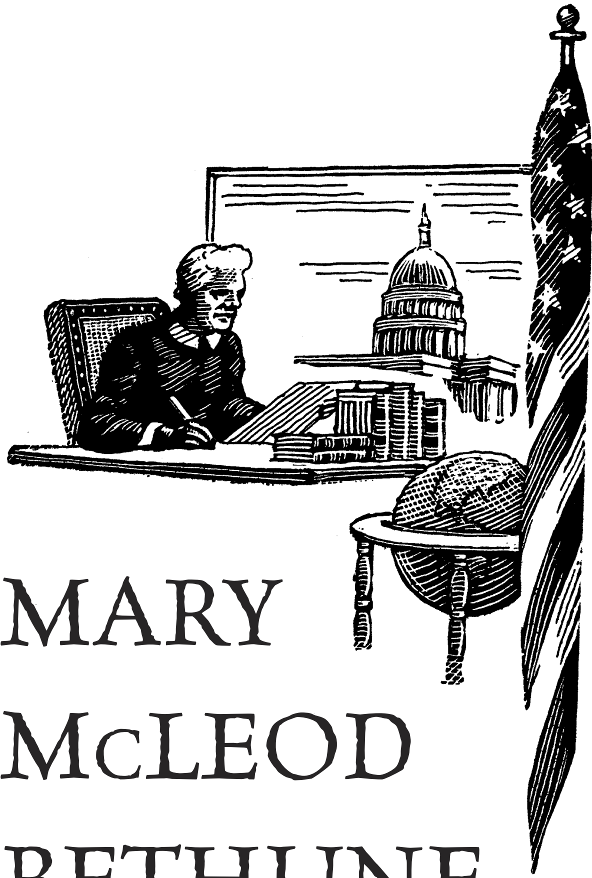
For editorial and secretarial assistance I am grateful to Mrs. Doris Fuller, Mrs. Louise Kellogg, Mrs. Frieda Graham, and lastly to my daughter, Barbara Lindsay, for her research and perceptive criticism, which went far beyond the usual editorial assistance.

E.G.S.
San Jose, California, March, 1957



MARY McLEOD BETHUNE

THE CHAIN OF HUMAN EVENTS

THE FIRST LOOK at the world that Mary remembered was from the high, bristly back of Old Bush, her father's mule. Mary was five years old, plenty old enough to do a share of the family work. The plowing would go a lot faster, her father said, as he lifted her up close to the collar around the old mule's neck, if somebody smart like Mary were guiding the mule straight in the furrows.

"The good Lord knows every minute saved is a help to get our cotton in the ground," he said, in that low, throaty voice of his that was like church music.

The little girl straddled the mule and fastened her fingers tight around the ropes that came out from the bit in the animal's mouth.

"When I say 'Gee,' you pull on the rope to the right hand, nearest the house, that is. When I say 'Haw,' you pull toward the swamp," her father said. "Then we'll drive a straight furrow all the way to the road."

Mary stared around the dusty, sun-warmed field, and at the weathered walls of her house. On the roof, she could see the patches of new yellow shingles her father and the boys had put on last winter to keep out the rain. She could see smoke curling toward the swamp.

So that's where smoke went—to the swamp! The forbidden swamp, a tangle of misshapen cypress trees, weaving light and shadow that was all mystery and wonder. Even Mary's grown

sisters ventured only to the very edge of the swamp, and then just once in a while, in the early spring, to bring back root herbs Granny needed to brew her medicine. And fistfuls of purple rooster-head violets.

When Will went to the swamp the way he had this morning to set his rabbit traps, Mama went about her work tight-lipped and anxious until she saw him coming home again, crossing the field in the dusk. If we didn't need rabbit meat so bad, Mary guessed, Will wouldn't be allowed to go at all. If he was home today he'd be walking in front of Old Bush, pulling the guide rope, and Mary wouldn't have had the chance to be sitting where she was, helping her father.

But someday, she meant to go into the swamp and clear through it, to see what was on the other side! She meant to go up and down the road, too—farther than the store, farther than the big house where Mama went to carry the white people's clean clothes home every Saturday.

Mary's gaze left the distant swamp and swung back to the stamped-down earth around the door. The yard was always a busy place. Mary spent most of her waking time there, minding the babies. Her father was always threatening to plant that ground into cotton, too, but Mama wouldn't let him. With nineteen people living in a three-room house, Mama said, you had to have a yard to spill out in. Besides, where would she have her clothes kettle to boil clothes? Where could she hang the clothes to dry? Where could all the family work go on that the house had no room for? Where could they sit on hot summer evenings? Where could the little children play? Just the mention of plowing up the yard for cotton got Mama riled up, worse than the time the hens got in the new-planted turnip patch.

Mary could see her mother already hanging the white people's clothes on the line. Pink dresses for the little girls, white shirts for Mr. Wilson. She was hanging up Pa's other

overalls, too—patched, Mama said, with everything but a turnip patch.

Mary could look down on the top of young Sam's head, as he sat on the front step eating a biscuit. Breakfast was over long ago. Chores, breakfast, and morning prayers all had to be got out of the way before sunup. But Sammy was the oldest. He worked out, at the livery stable in Mayesville, and didn't have to get such an early start. He didn't have to be at work till an hour after sunrise. Rebecca and Sally were already halfway down the road on the way to their cook jobs.

"Someday," Mary whispered vehemently, "I'll be grown up, too, and work out and bring home fifty cents a week."

She straightened up and her eyes met those of her father. She hardly ever saw his face that close. Mostly her view of her father was just his muddy, run-down shoes and his legs like tree trunks, or his strong black hands folded in front of him at the family prayers. But she was as tall as her father now, sitting on the back of the mule.

His eyes were looking at her, smiling a little. "You all right up there?" he asked.

"I'm all right," Mary answered, and waited while her father stepped back and grasped the wooden handles of the plow. . . .

But Mary McLeod Bethune's life story doesn't begin with that day's plowing. It doesn't even rightly begin with the day she was born. Where is the start of it? Where should the account of this great American woman have its beginning?

Three hundred years back, perhaps, in Africa? In 1619 when the slave catchers began their careers of capturing Africans and bringing them to be sold as chattels in the American colonies?

"They came in chains," writes the historian J. S. Redding, "and they came from everywhere along the west coast of Africa—from Cape Verde and the Bights of Benin and Biafra; from

Goree, Gambia, and Calabar; Anamaboe and Ambriz; the Gold, the Ivory and the Grain Coast; and from a thousand nameless villages inland. They were, these slaves, people of at least four great races—the Negritians, the Fellatahs, the Bantus and the Gallas—and many tribes whose names make a kind of poetry: Makalolu, Bassutas, Kaffir, Koromantis; the Senegalese and the Mandingos; Ibos, Iboni, Ibani (like the parsing of a Latin verb), Efik and Falahs, the Wysyahs and the Zandes. Native villages ran red with their blood. The plains and the valleys of Africa rang with their cries. Chained to each other, neck and foot, under the stroke of the merciless sun and the whine of the slaver's whip, the terrified Negroes were driven to the coast."

At that time, one branch of Mary McLeod's ancestry ruled as tribal chiefs somewhere in the vast area known as Guinea. They continued to rule, undisturbed, for another hundred and fifty years. But more and more slave traders kept landing on the African coast to herd men, women, and children into their ships' dark holds, and deliver such as survived the voyage to the Americas to be sold as slaves.

All this time, until about the year 1776, Mary's mother's people quietly raised their cattle on the gaunt, golden pastures of Africa. They sat under the "palaver" tree, judging and ruling the villages, following long tradition. The house they lived in was stately, their dress on ceremonial days was of the finest.

Then slavers descended on the village and white hairy hands fastened chains on arms that had worn bracelets of ivory and gold. Mary's great-grandmother was brought to South Carolina and sold to a family setting up a rice plantation near the coast. Her husband died on shipboard before the voyage was over.

"I come from a long line of despots," Mary McLeod Bethune joked, in her later years, when someone at Bethune-Cookman College complained that she was too bossy.

Certainly Africa and the history of a proud, capable people brought to ruin cannot be left out of her life story. Taken from widely separated parts of the vast continent, with different languages and customs and no bond or union except the condition of slavery, most of the Africans were cut off from their former life as completely as if they had died. Families were broken up. Men and women from different tribes were thrown together on one plantation. Often the only language in which they could communicate with each other was the English of their masters. Clothes, food, religion—everything was changed. A wall was raised, shutting out the traditions, the very life they had known in their African homes. But Mary McLeod's great-grandmother was of stubborn stock. She did not forget who she was, or where she had come from.

It was to the advantage of the slaveholders that the memories be blurred. It was easier to keep people from rebelling against the conditions of slavery if they ceased to remember freedom, if they could be made to believe that their present way of life, however miserable, was better than they'd known in "savage" Africa. And it was easier for the gentlemen and ladies who lived off the work of slaves to quiet their own consciences if they came to believe that all Africans were barbarians, something less than human.

Religion entered in, too. The idea took hold that the condition of slavery was good if it saved the souls of the heathen. So Christianity, the very religion that teaches that all men are brothers, was enlisted to belittle the African past. (The slaveholders couldn't foresee that the same Bible in which they found the words to support slavery would provide the words to make dreams of freedom come true.)

Mary's great-grandmother, the daughter of an African ruler, received the teachings of Jesus in her captivity. She was deeply religious and passed on her piety to her daughter, Sophia. But she also told the child, born on alien soil, everything that

she remembered about her African homeland. She told of the village life and of the coming of the slavers. "In the fields the grain was ripening," she mourned, "and there were none to harvest it when they took us away."

Sophia was sold away from her mother when she was still a child. She was a very old woman when her granddaughter Mary was born. But Africa was real to her. In her old age she had come to sit by the fire and tell stories her mother had told her and sing songs in a language whose words even she scarcely understood.

To the day of her death, Mary McLeod Bethune proclaimed her pride in being African. But her roots were deep in America, too.

At about the time that her great-grandmother was being offered on the auction block in Charleston, South Carolina, three men sat in a room over a bakeshop in the city of Philadelphia. John Adams, a lawyer from Boston, the patriarch Ben Franklin, and Tom Jefferson from Virginia had been delegated by the members of the Continental Congress to draft a declaration to let the world know why the three million people on the Atlantic seaboard were prepared to fight for their liberty.

To be truthful, the country was already at war. There remained only to declare for independence. The paper on the table before the three men was in Thomas Jefferson's handwriting. Surprisingly, he had been designated to frame the document.

"When in the course of human events. . . ." The young man read slowly at first, a little hesitantly. He was the youngest, the least experienced of the committee. He had worked all through the night on the preamble and the specific charges against the monarchy in its misgovernment of the colonies. Perhaps what he'd written was after all not what the others had in mind.

"…We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."

He read on with more confidence, stopping to change a word here and there. It was plain that John Adams and Franklin approved.

The young man came to the clause against slavery.

"He (the King) has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating a most sacred right of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who had never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation. ...the Christian king of Great Britain determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold…."

(In South Carolina, an auctioneer was droning: "What am I bid for this strong healthy wench? Fresh cargo, lately off the Schooner *Millicent*. What am I bid?"—Mary McLeod's great-grandmother was up for sale.)

But in the room at Philadelphia, John Adams shook his head. Ben Franklin pushed back his chair and slapped at a fly on his shirtsleeve. Adams and Franklin had not expected this. Thomas Jefferson was a Virginian, a slaveholder. Neither Adams nor Franklin had ever owned a slave. Both hated slavery, but...a clause condemning slavery would start controversy in the Continental Congress. They wanted to make it easy for *all* the delegates at the Congress to sign the document they were about to present. Georgia and South Carolina were doubtful. So was New York. It was important to have unanimity.

Besides, they argued, mention of the outrageous slave trade was unnecessary. It was implied in Jefferson's preamble… *All men are created equal,* equally entitled to life and liberty… It is unthinkable that a nation founded on this principle, they said confidently, would permit one human being to own

another. Logic and reason will demand that slavery disappear. But for now, nothing must threaten the unity of the colonies.

Tom Jefferson drew a line through the offending clause. This was the only major change in the document he had prepared. Yet this compromise in the name of "unity" set a pattern at the expense of the enslaved people which was to lead the new nation into tragedy.

Mary McLeod's great-grandmother knew nothing of what went on in that room in Philadelphia. Few of the 239,000 Black people on the continent were aware of the clause that was stricken from the noble document. But around the country many heard the Declaration read from the steps of public buildings and at village crossroads. All probably heard the bells that rang for liberty. They asked themselves (some even asked aloud): "Are the liberty bells ringing for me?"

The slaves did not need a document to arouse the deep craving for freedom. Before the Revolution, history records more than twenty-five insurrections in the Southern colonies, inspired by the human love of liberty. In the North a number of petitions for freedom were presented to governing bodies. "Members of the church of Christ," wrote one group in Massachusetts in 1774, "how can the master and the slave be said to fulfill that command, Bear ye one another's Burdens. How can the master be said to Bear my Burden when he bears me down with the heavy chains of slavery. . . ." Three years later, the very words of the Declaration of Independence were invoked in a petition for freedom: "Petitioners…have in common with all other men a Natural and Unalienable Right to that freedom which the Great Parent of the Universe hath Bestowed equally on all mankind. . . ." During the seven years of the Revolutionary War, four thousand American Black people enlisted and fought in the Continental Army. For the most part, they were freemen from the Northern colonies. But hundreds of slaves enlisted with the consent of their owners.

And in every Southern city, Black people who had managed to purchase their freedom were profoundly influenced by the promise of the Declaration. They joined their fellow Americans in the struggle to make a new kind of nation.

In one way or another, the African captives and their American children, free and enslaved, showed their faith in the words of the Declaration of Independence and supported the American struggle. There was some justification in their faith. One state after another in the North proclaimed emancipation. Vermont began it in 1777. By the turn of the century, every slave north of Maryland was free.

True, the two hundred thousand Black people living in the South were still considered property. And the Southern Abolitionists were persuaded to put off the problems of emancipation. But during the war and for the next decade, the lot of Southern slaves improved.

The laws against teaching slaves to read were ignored. In the towns and on small farms, many were taught to read and write and to keep household accounts. More slaves were allowed to earn money to buy their freedom. Their skills in farming and crafts were used more freely.

It is true that on the huge tobacco and rice plantations where the largest number of slaves were employed, conditions had improved only slightly. But rice and tobacco crops were becoming less profitable. It was believed that with profits gone, the excuse for slave labor would disappear. Slavery appeared at an ebb tide.

But children of slaves could still be sold away from their mothers. Mary's great-grandmother had borne two sons. One had died. A slave trader bought the other. The institution of slavery might be coming to its end, but the woman who had lived like a princess in Africa stood on American soil watching her son with chains on his legs, go off in the coffle of captives.

In 1787 delegates assembled for another convention, this time to adopt a constitution whereby the nation would be governed. Thomas Jefferson was not a delegate to the Constitutional Convention. He was in France on behalf of the American states. But his friend and neighbor, James Madison, was one of the leading delegates. The two men had agreed that the moment to end compromise on the question of slavery had come. If the promise of the Declaration of Independence was to be fulfilled, the new constitution must include a clause abolishing slavery.

But again the statesmen compromised at the slaves' expense. The best that the anti-slavery forces could do was to set a limit to the time slaves could be imported. In 1808, the slave trade could be stopped. Time and public opinion, it was believed, were on the side of liberty for the Black people.

Then, at the time when Sophia, Mary's grandmother, was born, something happened to make slavery worth preserving at all costs. The cotton gin was invented. The entire future of American history was changed by the invention of this small wooden instrument to take the seed out of a boll of cotton.

Now, with a few hundred acres of cotton and some "black field hands" bought cheap from the rice plantations or imported from Africa, a man could make a fortune. Three hundred thousand human beings were brought to be sold in the deep South between 1794, the year of the patenting of the cotton gin, and 1808, the year when the United States Government had pledged to stop the traffic in slaves.

And the Black people themselves? Those in the North who had won their freedom? Those in the South who had built new hopes on the promise of the "unalienable rights" of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness? Of the five hundred thousand Black people in the United States, not more than one thousand had a vote. But they did have the right of petition. Petitions for emancipation poured into Congress.

They did have the right of free speech and free press. Those who were free spoke for their brothers in chains. Those who could write, wrote broadsides against slavery. They did have the right of assembly. Public meetings were held in the North. Black ministers in the South spread the gospel of freedom straight from the Bible. Songs of freedom were on the lips of the oppressed.

The cotton planters felt a fear for their possessions. The aristocratic society riding on the backs of the slaves trembled for their beautiful white-pillared mansions. Talk of freedom had become a sickness, they felt.

So they practiced "preventive medicine." New slave codes were passed in the legislatures—old laws against the teaching of reading were renewed and strengthened. Every community in every slave state had its patrol of state militia or private guards.

Under the colonial government, before the Revolution, South Carolina had had a law which stated that "any person whatsoever who shall hereafter teach or cause any person of color, slave or former slave, to be taught to read and write, or shall use any slave as scribe in any manner of writing whatsoever, such persons shall forfeit the sum of 100 pounds."

This law, a dead letter for twenty years, was revived. To the fine was added a penalty of six months' imprisonment. Laws were passed against the movement of slaves on the highway, against assembly.

But it seemed that the whole world was conspiring to destroy the peace of mind of Southern planters. The slaves of Santo Domingo rebelled against their masters. Frightened refugees took ship for Charleston. Their arrival put the slave owners of South Carolina in a panic. The American experiment in self-government had proved contagious. In France, Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness was translated into *Liberty, Equality,* and *Fraternity*. The monarchy had fallen. A

Republic had been established. With a logic the South Carolina planters abhorred, the French had proclaimed freedom for the African slaves in their West Indian colony of Haiti.

The French had repented of their act, it was true. The Rights of Man gave way to the Rights of Empire. But slavery did not return to the island of Haiti. Under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture and later of Jean Jacques Dessalines and Henri Christophe, the former slaves from Africa fought a successful war for freedom.

Again, refugees with their slaves sailed into the safe ports of the United States. Again the slave owners shuddered. What had happened in Haiti could happen in South Carolina. Repressive laws redoubled in severity. News from Haiti was kept out of the papers. The mails were closed to literature from the North. Curfews were declared. Patrols were placed upon the roads.

But no measures were repressive enough to keep the name of Toussaint L'Ouverture secret from even the most remote backwoods plantation. Even the ten-year-old slave girl, Sophia, sold to a planter out in Sumter County, knew that somewhere on an island, a black man had burst his chains and ruled on a mountain top. She thanked the God her masters had said was the protector of the poor, the oppressed, the downtrodden.

Two hundred thousand Africans were smuggled into American harbors in the five years after the law against importation of slaves went into effect, three hundred thousand in the five years following. To plant and cultivate cotton required a vast amount of cheap labor. What could be cheaper than a slave who was paid no wages and given only enough rough food and clothing and shelter to support life; who could work, and give birth to more slaves?

It is probable, though we have no record, that Mary McLeod's father's people were among the slaves smuggled

into South Carolina at this time. (We do know that her ancestry was wholly of African origin. This was a point of pride to her throughout her life.)

Thomas Jefferson, an old and dying man, saw the bonds of slavery tightening. "I pity my country," he said, "when I remember that God is just."

In the next decade there were heartbreaking attempts to throw off the bonds. The whispered names of Gabriel, of Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner were added to the names of Toussaint L'Ouverture and Henri Christophe when the Blacks talked in the slave quarters. In the year Nat Turner planned rebellion and died, Sophia gave birth to a daughter whom Mr. Wilson, her owner, listed in his record book by the name of Patsy. Sophia had been on the Wilson plantation for only two years. She had borne three other children, but Mr. Wilson had not seen fit to buy them when he bought their mother. Where her beloved offspring were, under what masters, Sophia did not know.

The father of the girl cradled in her arms had been born in Africa. He hadn't lasted long on Mr. Wilson's plantation. Too proud to suit, he'd been sold to the first slave trader who came through Mayesville.

In a week Sophia would have to go out in the fields again. She intended to take the baby with her in a basket. That way the little one would be safe. She gripped the sleeping infant close. "Please God, let me keep this little baby."

Patsy, who was to be the mother of Mary McLeod Bethune, stirred and waked. She was a puny baby, wrinkled and scrawny. She was beginning life a slave and the child of slaves. But her daughter, Mary, was destined to be born free.