

STORIES OF FLORIDA
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A MARINE IN EBONY
By Jules A. Frost

DAVE TAYLOR

From a Virginia plantation to Florida, through perils of Indian war-fare; shanghaied on a Government vessel and carried 'round the world; shipwrecked and dropped into the lap of romance—these are only a few of the colorful pages from the unwritten diary of old Uncle Dave, ex-slave and soldier of fortune.

The reporter found the old man sitting on the porch of his Iber City shack, thoughtfully chewing tobacco and fingering his home-made cane. At first he answered in grumpy monosyllables, but by the magic of a good cigar, he gradually let himself go, disclosing minute details of a most remarkable series of adventures.

His language is a queer mixture of geechy, sea terms and broad "a's" acquired by long association with Nassau "conchs." Married to one of these ample-waisted Bahama women, the erst-while rambler and adventurer proved that rolling stones sometimes become suitable foundations for homes—he lived faithfully with the same wife for fifty-one years.

"Shippin' 'fore de mahst ain't no job to make a preacher f'm a youngster; hit's plenty tough; but I ain't nevah been sorry I went to sea; effen a boy gwine take to likker an' wimmen, he kin git plenty o'both at home, same as in for'n ports."

The old man bit off a conservative chew from his small plug, carefully wrapped the remainder in his handkerchief and chewed thoughtfully for some time before he continued.

"I wasn't bawn in Florida, but I be'n here so long I reckon hit 'bout de same thing. I kin jes remember leavin' Norfolk. My daddy an' mammy an' de odder chillun b'long to a Frenchman named Pinckney. Musta be'n 'bout 1860 or 1861, w'en Mahstah 'gins to worry 'bout what gwine happen effen war come an' de Vahginny slave-owners git beat."

He proceeded slowly, and in language almost unintelligible at times, as he talked, smoked and chewed, all at the same time; but here, the reporter realized, were all the elements of a true story that needed only notebook and typewriter to transform it into readable form.

Antagonism aroused by the Dred Scott decision, and the further irritation caused by the Fugitive Slave law were kicking up plenty of trouble during Buchanan's administration. South Carolina had already seceded. Major Anderson was keeping the Union flag flying at Fort Sumter, but latest reports said that there was no immediate danger of hostilities when Pierre Pinckney, thrifty Virginia planter of French extraction, went into conference with his neighbors and decided to move while the getting-out was still good.

With as little publicity as possible, they arranged the disposal of their real estate. No need to sell their slaves and livestock; they would need both in the new location. If they could manage to get to Charleston, they reasoned, surely they could arrange for a boat to St. Augustine. The Indians might be troublesome there, but by settling near the fort they should be reasonably safe.

Before the caravan of oxcarts and heavy wagons came within sight of the old seaport town, it became evident that they had better keep to the woods. Union soldiers, although still inactive, might at any time decide to confiscate their belongings, so they pushed on to the southward.

Long weeks dragged by before they finally reached St. Augustine. War talk, and the possibility of attack by sea again caused them to change their plans. Pooling their money, they chartered a boat and embarked for Key West. Surely they would be safe that far south. One of their Virginia neighbors, Fielding A. Browne, had settled there thirty years before. Taking advantage of the periodic sales of salvaged goods from wrecks on the treacherous keys, he had become wealthy and was said to hold a responsible position with the city.

Everyone was in a cheerful mood as the blue outline of Key West peeped over the horizon, and all come on deck to catch a glimpse of their new home. Suddenly dismay clutched at every heart as a Federal man-of-war swung out of the harbor and steamed out to meet them. The long-feared crisis had come. They ware prisoners of war.

Pinckney and his neighbors were marched into Fort Taylor. Their wives, children and slaves were allowed to settle in the city and care for themselves as best they could.

Pinckney's slaves consisted of one family, David Taylor and wife, with their family of ten pickaninnies. Colonel Montgomery, Federal recruiting officer, took advantage of the helplessness of the slave owners to sow discord among the blacks, and before many days big Dave, father of the subject of this sketch, had "jined de Yankees" as color sergeant and had been sent north, where he was killed in the attack on Fort Sumter.

His determined and energetic 260-pound wife served Mrs. Pinckney faithfully through the war and long afterward. Young Dave, or "Buddy," son of big Dave, although only in his early teens, was her chief aid. When the war was over and Mr. Pinckney walked out of Fort Taylor a free man, the portly Hannah "poo-h-poo-hed" the announcement that she was a free citizen. "Y'all done brung me heah," she blustered with emphasis, "an' heah I'se gwine t' stay."

Some years after the war Pierre Pinckney died. When his good wife became ill, frantic dismay pervaded the servants' quarters. As her last moments drew near, Mrs. Pinckney called the weeping Hannah to her bedside and laid a bag of money in her hand.

"To get you and the children back to old Virginia," she whispered with her last breath.

When the beloved "Missus" was laid to rest by the side of her husband in the Catholic cemetery, the bewildered Hannah took the money to a white man, an old friend of the family, and asked him to buy the tickets back to Virginia. He advised against it; said that the old home would not be there to comfort them. Houses had been burned, trees cut down and old landmarks destroyed. He suggested that they take the hundred dollars in gold and buy a little home in Key West, which they did.

Reconstruction days were as trying to Key Westers as to others all over the devastated land of Dixie. Slave owners, stripped of their possessions, taxed with an immense war debt and with no money or equipment to begin the slow climb back to normalcy were pathetic figures as they blistered their hands at toil that they had never known before. Many of the slaves were more than willing to stay with their former masters, but with no income, the problem of feeding themselves was the main issue with the whites, so it was out of the question to try to fill other mouths, and ex-slaves often had to shift for themselves, a hopeless task for a race that had never been called upon to exert initiative.

Hannah Taylor and her numerous offspring were a fair example of these irresponsible people. Like a ship adrift without skipper or rudder, they were at the mercy of every adverse wind of misfortune. Each morning they went out with frantic energy to earn or in some way procure sustenance for one more day. Young Dave hounded the sponge fishermen until they gave him an extra job. He made the rounds of the fishing docks, continually on the lookout to be of help, anxious to do anything at any time in exchange for a few articles of food that he could carry proudly home to his mother.

"Dem was mighty tryin' times," mused the old man, "an' I don't blame my mammy fer warmin' my pants when she had so much to worry 'bout. She had a way o' grabbin' me by de years an' shovin' my haid twixt her knees whilst she wuk on me sumpin' awful. No wonder I was scairt o' dese frammin's. I reckon dat was de cause o' me goin' t' sea. Ah mas' tell you 'bout dat.

"One day my mammy gimme fifteen cents an' say 'Go down to de market and fetch me some fish. Ah' lissen—don't you let no grass grew unda yo' feet. Go on de run an' come back on de jump. Does you fall down, jes' keep on a-goin' some-how.'

"Wid dat she turn an' spit on de step. 'You see dat spit,' she say. 'Ef hit be dry w'en you git back, I gonna beat de meat offen yo' bones. Git goin', now.'

"Well, I stahted, an I she' wasn't losin' no time. 'Bout hahf way to de mahket, I meets a couple o' stewards f'm a U.S. navy cutter anchored off de navy yard.

"Hol' on, dar, boy, 'dey sing out, 'wha you gwine so fas'? Grab dis here basket an' tote hit down to de dock.'

"I knowed I couldn't git back home 'fore dat spit dried, an' I be'n figgerin' how I could peacify my mammy so's to miss dat beatin'. I figger of I mek a quarter or hahf a dollar an' gin it to 'er, she mebbe forgit de paddlin'. So I take de bahsket an' foller 'em down to de water front. W'en we git dere dey was a sailor waitin' fer 'em wid a boat f'm de cutter. I set de bahsket in de boat an' stood waitin' fo' my money.

"You ain't finished yo' job yit,' dey say. 'Git yo'se'f in dat boat an' put dat stuff on be'd.'

"W'en I gits on deck a cullud boy 'bout my size say 'Wanna look about a bit?' So I foller him below an' fo' I knowed it, I feel de boat kinda shakin.' I run to a porthole an' look out. Dere was Key West too far away to swim back to.

"I ran up on deck, an' dare was de steward w'at gin me de bahsket to tote. 'W'at th'ell you doin' on bo'd dis ship,' he ahsk me.

"I tells 'im I ain't wantin' t' stay no mo'n he wants me, an' he takes me to de cap'm. 'I reckon he b'long to do navy now,' says de cap'm, 'so dey fix some papers an' I makes my mark on 'em.

"Ahftah a bit I find we bound fo' N'Orleans. 'Fore we got dere, a ship hove 'longside an' gin us a message to put about. I ahsk a li'l Irishman, named Jack, wha we gwine, an' he say, 'Outa de worl'.'

"Jesus wep't I say, 'my mammy think I be daid.' I couldn't read nor write, an' didn't know how to tell noboddy how to back a letter to my mammy, so I jes' let hit go, an' we staht back de way we come.

"I thought hit be'n stormin' all de time, but w'en we pahs thoo de Florida straits I see w'at a real storm's like. I didn't know, ontell we was hahf way down de South American coast, headin fer Cape Horn, dat we done pahs Key West, but I couldn't got off if I'd wanted to, 'cause I'd done jined de navy.

"Hit seem lak months 'fore we roun' de Cape an' head back north on de Pacific, an' hit seem lak a year 'fore we drop anchor in Hong Kong. Dey tell me de admiral was stationed dere an' de cap'n had to report to him. W'ile he was doin' dis, we gits shore leave.

"Wen Jack an' me gits on land, we couldn't onnerstan' a word, but we mek signs, an' a tough-lookin' Chink motion fer us to foller him. We go down a dark street an' turn thoo an alley, then into a big room lighted with colored paper lanterns. On de flo' we see some folks sleepin' wit some li'l footstools 'longside 'em, an some of 'em was smokin' long-stemmed pipes. I figger mebbe dey goin' put us to sleep an' knock us in de haid. I look back an' see de do' swingin' shut, slow like, so I run back an' stick my foot in hit and shove hit back open.

"Jack an me run back de same way we come. Pretty soon we find anotha sailor an' go wit him to a yaller man dat could speak English. He pin a li'l yaller flag on our shirts an' say hit de badge o' de Chinese gov'ment, an' we be safe, cause we b'long to de U.S. navy.

"We go out to see de sights, but nevah hear one mo' word o' English; so ahftah a time we go back to de ship an' stay ontell we put to sea again.

"Nex' we sails fo' Panama. W'en we ties up dere, Jack an' me goes ashore. Ah nevah befo' see such pretty high-yaller gals in all my life. Looks lak dey made o' marble, dey so puffick.

"Me an' Jack gits likkered up de fust thing, an' I done lose 'im. Dat worry me some, 'cause we need each otha. Wit' his haid an' my arms we mek one pretty good man. Dat lil Irishman was a fightin' fool. Weighed only 90 pounds, but strong an' wiry. Co'se he git licked mos' do time, but he allus ready fer anotha fight.

"Didn't lak for folks to call him Irish. 'He fodder was Irish and he mudder American,' he say; 'I be'n born aboard a Dutch brig in French waters. Now you tell me what flag I b'longs undah.'

"Wen we gits back to de ship, de boys tells me some English sailors beat Jack up in de sportin' house. Sumbuddy sing out 'Beat it—de marines comin'!', an' dey all run for de ship an' leff Jack dere.

"I don't ahsk no mo' questions; jes' start back on a run to find my buddy. At dat time I weigh 180, an' was pretty husky fer my age. Bein' likkered plenty, I nevah thought 'bout gittin' beat up mahse'f.

"W'en I gits back, dere was a big Limey stahndin' wid his arms crost de do'. 'All dem in, stay in, an' all de outs stay out,' he say.

"Now I be'n trained to respec' white folks—what is white folks—ever sence I bawn; but w'en I think 'bout Jack in dere, hahf dead, mebbe, dat Limey don't look none too white to me. I take a runnin' staht an' but 'im in de belly wid my haid.

"De nex' do' was locked, an' I bus' hit down. Dere was Jack, 'bout hahf done f'. Blood all over de fla'. Ev'thing in de room busted up an' tipped over. I hauls 'im to a back do', but hit locked. I kick out a winder, heaves 'im onto my shoulder, an' runs back to de ship.

"Wen we comes up, dere was de cap'm standin' at de rail. His blue eyes look lak he love to kill us.

"'Fall in!' he says, an' we does. 'Go for'd,' he says, an' we goes.

"'Now' he says, wat's all dis about?'

"'Well,' says Jack, 'I didn't staht no fight. I jes' goes into a saloon, peaceful like, an' a damn Limey says, pointin' to a British flag on dere own ship, 'You see dat flag?'

"'Aye,' says Jack, 'an' still I don't see nuthin'.'

"'I be'n over de seven seas,' says de Limey, 'an' I see dat ol' flag mistress of all of 'em.'

"'You be'n around some,' says Jack, 'but I done a li'l sailin' mahse'f. Fust place I went was to France. Grass look lak hit need rain,' (So he tells dat Limey what he done fo' hit).

"'Nex' I goes to Germany,' he says; 'ground no good; need fer'lizer.' (So he tells 'im what he done on German soil).

"'Atter dat I ships fo' England,' Jack tells de Limey, lookin' 'im straight in de eye. 'Fust thing I see w'en we land is dat British flag w'at you be'n braggin' so loud about.' (So he tells dat Limey w'at 'e used de flag fer).

"'Fore God, Cap'm,' says Jack, 'dat Limey lan' on me wid bofe feet 'fore I say anotha word. Nevah got in one lick. Fack is, Cap'm I ain't be'n doin' no fightin' sence I done lef' dis here ship."

"'Go below,' says de cap'm 'an' clean yo'se'f up. Dis de lahst time you two gwine git shore leave on dis trip.' He try to look mad, but I see he wantin' to lahf.

"'De nex' day," Uncle Dave finished, with a whimsical smile, "I see de bos'n readin' in de paper 'bout de war 'twixt America an' England. Hit was 'bout our li'l war— what dey stahted an' we finished."

The dusky old veteran of many battles unwrapped the small piece of black tobacco in the soiled handkerchief, decided on conservation, and slowly wrapped it up again.

"'Nex' comes orders from de admiral in Hong Kong to sail fer Rio Janeiro. W'en we drop anchor, dere was some o' da meanes' lookin' wharf rats I evah see. Killers, dey was, willin' to knock anybody off, any time, fer a few cents. We lines up fer shore leave, but dey mek Jack an' me stay on de ship. Our rucus in Panama done got us in bad wid de cap'm. But Ah reckon hit was fer de bes'. One of our men come back wid a year cut off an' a busted nose. 'Nother one neveh come back at all.

"'One mornin' I see 'em runnin' up a long pennant an' all de sailors lahf an dahnce about lak dey crazy. Hit was de signal 'omeward boun'. We weigh anchor and head fer N'York.

"'Well, Taylor,' da officer say, when he pay me off 'you gwine ship wid us again?'

"'I gotta go home,' I tells 'im; 'got a job t' finish up in Key West.'

"So dey gin me my discharge an' a Gov'ment pahs on de Mallory liner Clyde. W'en I gits to Key West, fust place I goes was to dat fish mahket w'ere my mammy done sent me three year an' six months befo'. I buy fifteen cents wuth o' fish an' go on home.

"W'en I git dere, dey was jes' settin' down to dinner. 'Wait,' Ah say, 'put on one mo' plate.'

"My mammy look at me lak she done see a ghost. Den she run an' 'gin beatin' on me.

"'Hol' on,' Ah tells 'er, 'you ain't forgot dat beatin' yit? I done got yo' fish,' an' I gin 'er de pahcel.

"'Mah boy, mah boy,' she say, 'Ah beatin' on yuh kase Ah so proud t' see yuh. Heah Ah done wear black fer yuh, an' gin yuh up fer daid; an' bress de Lawd, heah you is, lak come beck f'm de grave.'

"Ah retch down, in m' pocket an' pull a pahcel an' lay hit in her han'; three hunnert sebenty-eight dollahs, all de money I done made wid de Gov'ment sence Ah left, an' I gin hit all to 'er. She lak t' had a fit; an Ah she' was de head man o' dat fembly whilst Ah stayed.

"But de salt water stick to me—Ah couldn't stay ashore. So ahftah Ah visit wid 'em a spell, Ah goes down to de docks an' sign t' ship on a fo'-mahster tramp. Dat ol' tub tek me all ovah de worl'."

Pressed for details of some of his physical encounters on this second voyage, Uncle Dave seemed in deep thought, and finally said:

"Well, Ah tell you 'bout de time I fout de bully of de ship. We was still in Key West, waitin' fer wind. Dis ol' tramp ship, she got a crew picked up f'm all ovah de worl'. Dere ain't no sich thing as a color line dere. At mess time, white an' black all git in de same line. As dey pahs by de table, each one take a knife an' cut off a piece o' meat.

"Dere was a big, high-yeller Haiti higgah, what thought he done own de ship. 'Trouble wiz 'Merican niggahs,' he say, 'dey ain't got no sperrit. I be offisaire een my own countree—I don't bow ze knee to nobody, white or black.'"

"So when dey line up, dis here Haitian come crowdin' in ahead o' de fust man in de line, an' he cut off de bes' lean meat 'fore we gits ours.

"What's dis,' Ah say to de man ahead o' me, 'huccome dat white man don't bus' dat damn yeller swab wide open?'

"Dat's Rousseau,' e says; 'Ain't nobuddy on dis ship big enough to put 'im on de tail end o' de line.'

"I size 'im up good w'ile we eats. He weigh 196, dey tells me, an' nobuddy be'n lucky 'nuff to lay 'im out. 'Cordin' t' ship rules, dey couldn't gang up on 'im. Cap'm mek ev'ybuddy fight single. Wan't no sich thing ez quarrelin'. Effen two sailors gits in a rucus, day pipe 'em up on de main deck."

"Do what?" the reporter asked.

"Pipe 'em up—de bos'n blow a whistle an' call 'em in t' fight it out, w'ile de othas watch de fun. Den day gotta shake han's, an' hit done settled.

"Well, Ah see dis here Haiti niggah be a li'l bigger'n me, but Ah figger I gwine gin 'im a chajnce to staht sump'n de nex' time. So atter I takes a couple o' drinks, I goes down early an' gits fust in de line. Sho' 'nuff, Rousseau comes up an' crowds in ahead o' me. Ah pushes him to one side, an' gits ahead o' him. He raises his eyebrows, sorta suprised-like, an' gits ahead o' me. I be fixin' to knock 'im clean ovah de rail, but by dat time, de Cap'm had 'is eye on us.

"Pee-e-e-p,' go de whistle; 'Tay-lor-r-r-r' de bos'n sing out.

"Taylor," I ahnswer.

"Come to de mahst.'

"I tells 'em how it was, how I fixin' to knock dat niggah so far into de Gulf we be thoo eatin' 'fore he kin swim back.

"Pipe 'im up, bos'n,' says de cap'm.

"Rousseau comes in, and de whole crew wid 'im, t' see de fight. 'Pull off yer shirts,' says de cap'm, an' we done it. 'Wait,' says de bos'n; 'de deck jes' be'n swabbed down—why bloody hit up, Cap'm? How 'bout lettin' 'em fight on shore?'

"Day was a flatfom 'side a buildin' nex' to de water. Dey all line de rail an' let us go ashore t' scrap hit out. Boy, dat was some fight; We fout ontell we was lak two game roosters—both tired out, but still wantin' t' keep goin'. We jes' stan' dere, han's on each otha's shoulders, lookin' into each otha's eyes, blood runnin' down to our toes. Pretty soon he back off an' try to rush me. I side steps, an' gits in a lucky lick below de heart. He draps to his knees, an' rolls ovah on his back, wallin' his eyes lak he dyin'.

"Dey lay 'im on de deck an' souse 'im wid a bucket o' water, but he sleeps right on. De res' go back to de mess line, all but me—I wan't hongry. De nex' day I gits in line early, but dey wan't no Haiti niggah t' muscle in ahead o' me. He kep' to his bunk mighty nigh a week."

Judging from the appearance of this feeble old man, one would hardly think that he was once a rollicking scrapper, with ready fists like rawhide mallets. Old Dave dutifully gives full credit to the law of heredity.

"M' daddy was six feet six, an' weighed 248 pounds," he said proudly. "Nevah done a hahd day's wuk in 'is life."

When pressed for an explanation of this seeming phenomenon, the old man sniffed disdainfully.

"Does stock breeders wit a \$10,000-stallion put 'im on de plow?... Dey called my daddy de \$10,000 niggah."

Uncle Dave sat, stroking his cane for a few minutes, then smiled faintly. "My mammy was mighty nigh as big, an' nevah seen a sick day in her life. Wit a staht lak dat, hit ain't no wonder I grewed up all backbone an' muscle."

While there have been many instances of atrocious cruelty to slaves, Uncle Dave believes that other cases have been unduly magnified. He says that he was never whipped by his master, but remembers numerous chastisements at the hands of Miss Jessie, his young owner, daughter of Pierre Pinckney.

"De young missus used to beat me a right smaht," he recalled with an amused smile. "I b'longed to her, y'see. She was a couple o' years younger'n me. I mind I used to be hangin' 'round de kitchen, watchin' 'em cook cakes an' otha good things. W'en dey be done, I'd beg for one, an' dey take 'em off in de otha room, so's I couldn't steal any.

"Soon as de young missus be gone, I go an' kick ovah her playhouse an' upset her toys. When she come back, she be hoppin' mad, an' staht beatin' me.

"'Jessie,' her ma'd say, 'you'll kill Buddy, beatin' him dat way.'

"'I don't care,' she say, 'I'll beat him to death, an' git me a bettah one.'

"I'd roll on de flo' an' holler loud, an' preten' she hurt me pow'ful bad. By'm by, when she git ovah her mad spell, she go off in da otha room an' come back sid some o' dem

good things fo' me." The old man's eyes twinkled. "Dat be w'at I'se atter all de time," he explained.

The perils of a life at sea are not as great as fiction writers sometimes indicate, according to this old sea dog. He says that in all his voyages, he has been in only one serious wreck. That was on a reef of coral keys off the Bahamas.

"Day say dey ain't no wind so bad but what it blows some good to somebuddy," observed the old man. "Dat same wind what land us on de rocks done blow me to de bes' woman in de worl'. Ah reckon."

He chewed slowly, as he gazed out over the dingy housetops toward the mass of feathery clouds, which must have been floating over the rocky shoals off Nassau.

"She was de daughter o' de wreckin' mahater, a Nassau niggah by de name o' Aleck Gator. W'en de crew done got us off de shoal and was towin' de wreck in, dere she was, stahndin' on de dock, waitin' fer her daddy. Big, overgrown gal, black an' devilish-lookin', noways handsome; but somehow I jes' couldn't keep my eyes offen her. I notice she keep eyein' me, too.

"W'en we gits ashore, I didn't lose no time gittin in a good word f' mahse'r. 'Fore I knowed it, we was talkin' 'bout wha' we gwine live... Fifty-one years is a mighty long time to stick to one woman, 'specially w'en you be'n lookin' over so many 'fore makin' up yo' mind ... Dis is her."

Uncle Dave extended a tinted photograph. His gnarled fingers trembled as he handed it over, and there was a suspicious softness in the lines of his wrinkled old face, as he looked fondly at the likeness of the stolid, dark features.

"Hit be'n mighty lonesome since she done lef' dis worl' fo' year ago," he said with feeling, as he carefully wrapped up the picture and put it away.

Uncle Dave has definite ideas of his own regarding domestic economy. "Trouble wid young folks nowadays is dey don't have no good unnerstahndin' 'fore dey gits married. 'Fore we ever faces de preacher, I tells her she ain't gittin' no model man fer a husban'. I lake my likker, an' I gwine have it w'en I wants it.

"Now lissen, I tells 'er, 'effen I comes home drunk, don't you go t' bressin' ee[TR:?] out. Don't you even tetch me; jes' gimme a li'l piller an' lemme go lay down on de flo' somewheres. Atter I drop off t' sleep, you kin tear de house down, and hit don't botha me none. Wen I wakes up, I be all right.'

"Well, de fust time I come home full o' likker she done ferget w'at I tell her, an' staht shovin' me. I done bus' 'er on de jaw so pow'ful hahd hit lif' her feet offen de flo' an' she lan' in de corner on her haid. W'en I wakes up an' sees w'at I done, I wish I could hit mahse'f de same way. F'm dat day on, we nevah had no mo' trouble 'bout de likker question."

The weight of years has at last cooled the hot blood, but a hint of departed swashbuckling days still glistens in the old eyes as he sits on his narrow porch and recalls scenes of the old days.

To one interested in the psychology of the Southern negro, this shriveled old man, with his half-bantering, half-pathetic attitude offers an interesting study. Borrowed from a page of history, he seems a curiosity, like a fossil magically restored to life, endowed with the power of speech, telling of events so deeply buried in the past that they seem almost unreal.