

Cases like the above just quoted were paid for through the efforts of all the colored people throughout the State, who contributed freely to the expense of the employment of lawyers.

While speaking of slavery in California, and the numerous laws to prevent Free Negroes from coming to or residing in the State, and the number of colored people who left the State and went to live in Canada, and afterward returned to fight it out in California, there was one Negro woman who left the State also to go to Canada. Any of the old pioneer colored people, when asked concerning her, immediately begin to tell all sorts of queer stories about her, and usually end by saying: "She always wore a poke bonnet and a plaid shawl," and "she was very black, with thin lips." Then sometimes they will also add: "She handled more money during pioneer days in California than any other colored person."

It will not interest the average colored person of today, in California, whether this strange woman was a witch or a great financier, but the following story concerning her activities with the hero, John Brown, of Harper's Ferry, will interest more than one. While the general public may have criticized her life, as they thought they knew it, nevertheless, if the story which I am relating be true, she was in disguise a modern "Queen Esther." A colored lady once told the writer that the mysterious woman—who was her personal friend—had said to her that she had no respect for white people because of the way they had treated her when she was a slave, and that she purposed to rule them with an iron hand. From the different stories told concerning her, she knew the morals of pioneer California, and if history be true, more than one pioneer man and woman did things that they would rather the court records did not mention. Yet the world passes over their faults and says that they were pioneers, and had made it possible for the State to become such, and that they had developed its resources. Charity is thrown over the faults of these pioneer empire-builders; then why may not a little charity be spared to this black slave woman, who was really a pioneer character of early San Francisco?

This story was given to the writer by a Mr. William Stephens, of Oakland, California (now at Del Monte), who said: "While on the private car of Mr. Crocker, and while the car was at one time in the railroad yards at Point Levy, Quebec, Canada, I was engaged in conversation with the foreman of the yards, who, after learning that we were from San Francisco, asked if I had ever seen 'Mammy Pleasants.' I said I had, and he then told me that his father had been a Canadian Labor Commissioner before the Civil War, and also had been connected with the Underground Railroad (a society organized to assist Negro slaves to escape to Canada). When the slaves reached Canada, his father, as Labor Commissioner, had seen to their securing work, that they might not become public charges."

This foreman of the railroad yards further told Mr. Stephens that his father had seen "Mammy Pleasants" give John Brown a large sum of money, and that this money was used by John Brown in financing his raid on Harper's Ferry. Mr. Stephens said that he paid no attention to this story because of the fact that he had never heard anyone in California say that "Mammy Pleasants" had been to Canada. But a number of years afterward, at the death of "Mammy Pleasants," there appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle and Call* a wonderful biography of the woman which Mr. Stephen saved, and from which the writer was permitted to make the following copy:

San Francisco Call, January 4, 1904: "Her epitaph is written; the tombstone of 'Mammy Pleasants' will express her loyalty to the hero of Harper's Ferry. Tribute to John Brown, remains of woman who gave him financial assistance are borne to last resting place. The remains of 'Mammy Pleasants,' who died early Monday morning at the home of Lyman Sherwood, on Filbert street, will rest tonight under the soil of the little cemetery in the town of Napa, to which her body was taken this morning. One last request of 'Mammy Pleasants' was that there be placed above her grave a tombstone bearing her name, age, nativity, and the words: 'She was a friend of John Brown's.' One of the many interesting stories of her eventful career, told by Mrs. Pleasants, was her experience during the exciting times preceding the outbreak of the Civil War. With the money inherited from her first husband, she came to California, and was here in 1858, when the first news of John Brown's efforts to free the slaves of the South were conveyed to San Francisco. Being in full sympathy with the movement, she conceived the idea of lending him financial assistance for the undertaking, and April 5, 1858, found her eastward bound with a \$30,000 United States treasury draft, which had been procured for her through the aid of Robert Swain, John W. Coleman and Mr. Alford.

"Reaching Boston, Mrs. Pleasants arranged for a meeting with John Brown in Windsor, Canada. Before leaving Boston, Mrs. Pleasants had her draft exchanged

for Canadian paper, which she converted into coin and finally turned over to Brown. After a conference in Canada, it was agreed between them that he should not strike a blow for the freedom of the Negro until she had journeyed to the South and had aroused the feelings of rebellion among her people. Disguised as a jockey, she proceeded to the South, and was engaged in her part of the plot when she was startled by the news that Brown had already made his raid on Harper's Ferry and had been captured. Learning that the authorities were in pursuit of Brown's accomplices, Mrs. Pleasants immediately fled to New York; and, after remaining in hiding for some time, assumed another name and made her way back to California.

"When Brown was captured, there was found on his person a letter reading: 'The ax is laid at the root of the tree. When the first blow is struck, there will be more money to help.' The message was signed 'W. E. P.' For months the authorities vainly searched for the author of the message. In later years it developed that Mrs. Pleasants had written the letter, but in signing it she had made her first initial 'M' look like 'W.' Mrs. Pleasants always blamed Brown for hastening his attack at Harper's Ferry, which she claimed cost her in all over \$40,000. Among her effects are letters and documents bearing upon the historical event in which she played a secret and important part."

It may interest the reader to know that in 1864, about the first of October, the family of John Brown, of Harper's Ferry fame, reached California. They came across the plains and reached a meadow near Red Bluff, California, on the above-named date. They spent the fall on the meadow and afterward removed into Red Bluff upon the approach of winter. One of the daughters, "Sara," accepted a position in the public school at Red Bluff, teaching for a number of years, during which she had as a pupil a colored student by the name of Miss Clara Logan, who today lives in San Francisco, and is the widow of the late Mr. Albert Frazier. Miss Sara Brown later in life moved to the Santa Cruz Mountains, between Los Gatos and Saratoga, where she recently died. Another daughter, Mrs. Ruth Brown-Thompson, located in Pasadena, California, as did also their brother, Owen Brown.

Returning to the subject of "Mammy Pleasants": If reports be true of her activities as financial adviser to distinguished white gentlemen in California, she must have come into possession of the cold facts that men were selling Negro slaves and were making great fortunes from their labor in the mines of California. She realized that after the Negroes had worked sufficiently long to pay the price asked for their freedom in California, and with the crude manner of living then in the State, there soon would be a race of free Negroes in California, with neither health nor government protection. She had great confidence in John Brown's sincerity, and believed that, together with her help, he would start a bold dash for freedom for all slaves. The mere fact that she went to Boston before starting on this history-making and daring undertaking will readily recall the fact that Boston was the home of the great Abolitionists, and that all the workings through the Underground Railroad were directed from there. It was the home of the immortal William Lloyd Garrison, Sumner and our own Hon. Fred. Douglass. The sincere friends of the Negro slaves were in Boston. This California black woman may have spent her remaining days, for all anyone knows, in an effort to repay the money given to John Brown, notwithstanding the following, which appeared in the *San Francisco News-Letter* and was republished in the *Oakland Tribune*, September 3, 1916:

"The true story of 'Mammy Pleasants': The recent sale of oil lands of the Bell estate for \$1,800,000 has created a flutter in oil circles. Not many years ago this same land was hawked about San Francisco by parties who had the option on it for \$15,000, and there were no buyers. It seems a queer thing, that while there was oil on three sides of the land, no one could be persuaded into the idea that it was to be found in that particular tract. Some twenty or more of San Francisco's capitalists are now metaphorically kicking themselves for their lack of venture, when they had such a chance to admit opportunity knocking at their doors.

"In this connection, some papers have stated that Thomas Bell was induced to buy this land by old 'Mammy Pleasants,' his housekeeper and servant, when she was with him in the old 'House of Mystery' on Octavia street. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Pleasants built that house and owned it, and never was Tom Bell's servant or the servant of anyone else while she lived in San Francisco. She was his personal friend and business advisor, and for years was supposed to exercise some uncanny power over him.

"Mrs. Pleasants was a wonderful woman, with a dominating mind, and bent everyone about her to her will. She was born a slave in Georgia, and worked as a cotton picker on a plantation. One day a planter named Price stopped to ask the

way, as he was riding past on horseback. Her ready reply and bright mentality so attracted his attention that he told her owner that she was too smart to be a slave and purchased her freedom for \$600. He sent her to Boston to be educated, but the family to whose keeping she was entrusted failed to keep faith and merely made her a drudge.

"She came to San Francisco in 1849, with \$50,000 in gold from the sale of Cuban bonds from her first husband's estate. His name was Alexander Smith. His home in Boston was a resort for such men as William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips and the coterie of men who advocated the abolition of slavery. On his deathbed Smith made his wife promise to use his legacy in the liberation of slaves. When she came to San Francisco, California, she loaned out money at 10 per cent per month and accumulated a fortune.

"She had a stormy life. In 1858 she carried out her husband's wishes by meeting John Brown in Chatham, Canada, and giving him \$30,000 to start the Harper's Ferry fight. He bought 15,000 condemned government rifles with the money, at \$2 apiece. After Brown's capture letters from her, signed 'M E P.,' were found upon his person. The detectives, however, read her rough signature as 'W. E. P.,' and thus she evaded them and reached California on a ship that came around Cape Horn. She escaped detection by giving her ticket to a white woman, and sailed in the steerage under an assumed name.

"When the famous divorce case of Sharon v. Sharon went to trial in this city, Mrs. Pleasants backed the plaintiff to the extent of \$65,000. It was claimed that Tom Bell advanced the money to get even with Sharon, but such was not the case. She had a way of taking sides with the under-dog, and every cent advanced was her own.

"Mrs. Pleasants was locked out of the 'House of Mystery' after the death of Bell. At the time he fell over the bannisters in the night and was killed, it was claimed that 'Mammy Pleasants' threw him over to get several hundred thousand dollars that he left her in his will. When the will was probated, however, it transpired that she was not even mentioned. The motive, therefore, fell to the ground and the case was dropped. Those who knew her intimately declared that her name was omitted from the will at her own request. She argued that if she were remembered in the will, some people might think the legacy was hush money, given her by Bell to preserve silence over some dark spot in his life.

Thomas Bell and she were rare, warm personal friends, and that was all there was in the story. She was on friendly terms in the old days with most of the men in San Francisco worth knowing—W. C. Ralston, D. Q. Mills, Newton Booth, Lloyd Tevis, David Terry and a score of other prominent men.

"It is claimed that she went into a trance and saw the future of the oil land wealth, and induced Bell to buy. This story is all moonshine, as he was a practical and matter-of-fact man and despised everything connected with the occult. Mrs. Pleasants probably saw in this land a good place to raise beans, such as she used to cook in Boston, and was governed in her choice solely by this idea.

"What irony there is in fate! After Bell's death she was locked out of the 'House of Mystery' and died in poverty in a little place on Baker street, where friends had given her an asylum. So ended the old colored woman who for years was a power in San Francisco's affairs and who so largely aided in precipitating the crisis that started the Civil War by furnishing John Brown with the funds to start his historical raid at Harper's Ferry.

"Before her death she made a transfer of all her property to Sam Davis, of Carson City, on the ground that he was the only person who came to her assistance when she was thrown into insolvency and supposed to be in want. She also furnished him the data with which to found the story of her life."