

"SHE WAS A FRIEND OF JOHN BROWN"

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Although little known to history, Mamie Pleasant played an important part in the anti-slavery movement.

"She Was a Friend of John Brown"

Earl Conrad

A FEW years ago a middle-aged white man, with slightly graying hair, stood over a black woman's grave in an abandoned cemetery in Napa, California. The place of burial was concealed by weeds that grew high over it. Here lay the remains of a famous West Coast Negro, Mary Ellen Pleasant, whom time had cheated of her last request, that her tombstone bear the inscription, "She Was a Friend of John Brown." No stone marked the final resting place. Apparently the wooden one placed there at her last rites had fallen into decay. she had been neglected and forgotten for a full generation after her death, until this white man, an his-



torian of John Brown, came to the scene and snapped a picture of the low mound covered with weeds. Such was Mrs. Pleasant's belated recognition for the \$30,000 she claimed to have given to the martyred Brown to aid him in his historic campaign at Harper's Ferry. Whether or not Mrs. Pleasant contributed such a large sum is a point that has been contested, and it is right that this claim be challenged; but none can doubt that Mary Ellen Pleasant did know John Brown and that she aided him and the anti-slavery cause with money. Although rumors of her part in the Harper's Ferry incident had been whispered for years, the black woman kept secret for more

than forty years her relationship to the Old Man. Her story in general, when revealed by her almost at the end of her life in 1901, stood up under the test of investigation, and it holds up under examination to this very day.

Mrs Pleasant was a politically powerful person in the history of California. Arriving there in the period of the gold rush of 1849 she grew up with the State to become a business woman who warranted the respect of every figure of importance, and a person of some notoriety as well, for her operations in real estate and her influence on many prominent private lives. "Mammy" Pleasant, as she became known, was famous, chiefly, for her relationship to the rise of the Barbary Coast. Taking a cue from the rough-riding white men who amassed fortunes by any and all means, Mrs. Pleasant plunged into Barbary Coast operation, and became wealthier and more influential than most of her teachers. Despite this fame, or notoriety as it was regarded in California, she will doubtless be remembered chiefly, if not only, for the contribution that was the high mark of her life, her association with the Commander of the Harper's Ferry expedition.

Mary Ellen was born in Philadelphia probably in the year 1814,

a free Negro. Her mother was a Louisiana Negro and her father a Kanaka. At the age of seven she was sent to Nantucket where she was placed at work in a huckster shop. This early experience seems to have set the tone for her later business sagacity. Later she went to Boston to work, and this city, with its flourishing abolition movement at the time, represented a turning point in her life. While employed in boot-binding and vest-making she met and married her first husband, a wealthy Cuban named James W. Smith. Smith was an abolition sympathizer, and the friend of William L. Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Lewis Hayden and others. Often the abolition leaders came to the Smith home, and Mary naturally became absorbed in the question of the freeing of her people. Mr. Smith died in 1844, and his last request was that his wife devote a portion of the money that he left to the cause of emancipating the slaves. As a result of the sale of bonds bequeathed to her Mary came into possession of about \$45,000.

A few years later, in 1848, she married John J. Pleasant. Together they went to California, where they invested the money in real estate. Mrs Pleasant op-

erated a boarding house in San Francisco, and to this board came Newton Booth, one of many men afterwards distinguished in the economic and political scene, who was elected Governor of California even as he stayed at the Pleasant home.

Throughout this period Mrs. Pleasant kept in touch with the East Coast abolitionists, Garrison and Phillips. She subscribed to *The Liberator*, and studied carefully the operations of Brown in Kansas. In 1858 she decided to go east and meet the Old Man and give him funds to continue his work. It is doubtful whether she then knew that Brown contemplated any raid in the Virginia region.

It is a matter of record that she drew a large-sized United States Treasury draft early in the Spring of 1858, and that she sailed to the east. She arrived in New York, converted her draft into a Canadian draft, and immediately headed for Chatham, Canada. She wrote to persons who could place her in touch with John Brown, and soon a meeting occurred. According to Mrs. Pleasant, one night in her room she turned over the whole amount of her check to John Brown and his son. Although the matter of the amount of money

passed over to Brown has been questioned (because historians have been unable to account where and how he spent such a large sum, for he certainly did not have such resources at the time he raided in Virginia), it has been proved that Mrs. Pleasant was in Chatham at about this time. Records on file in that place to this day show that in September of 1858 she bought property there.

It was part of the agreement of Mrs. Pleasant with the martyr that she would go into slave territory at about the time Brown was ready to make his stand, in order to organize and arouse the slaves in the neighborhood of his strike. Mrs. Pleasant claimed that she was enlisting the sympathy of Negroes along the Roanoke River at the time when Brown struck. That is one of the points that can no longer be verified. It would have been a very remarkable accomplishment if a business woman could have turned agitator and organizer as casually as that—yet in her case, not impossible, for she was a most versatile woman.

Mrs. Pleasant was shocked when John Brown was captured. "He started the raid on Harper's Ferry before the time was ripe," she said. "I have never been able to figure it out. It was a big

blunder all around and when we saw that things had ended in failure (she had an accomplice in the agitational work), we began to look about for our own safety, for we read in the papers that all of Brown's fellow-conspirators were being sought for by the authorities."

Mrs. Pleasant said that among Brown's papers, when he was captured, was a letter from her, which contained about these words: "The axe is laid at the root of the tree. When the first blow is struck, there will be more money and help." The letter was signed W. E. P. The authorities went hunting for W. E. P. Mrs. Pleasant explained that when she wrote an "M" it looked like a "W," and to this fact she ascribed her own elusion from the authorities. This letter has never been located, and it does not appear in any contemporary records, but such was the secrecy of the John Brown affair that much of its full ramifications have not been revealed to this day. If that letter was written it may yet come to light.

She returned to the West Coast in 1859 or early in 1860, soon after Brown was executed.

Mrs. Pleasant kept the secret of her dealings with Brown until the closing years of her life.

On October 20th, 1901 she sent a telegram to Sam P. Davis, editor of the Carson City (Nevada) Appeal, and also Comptroller of the State of Nevada, asking him to come to San Francisco. The old lady was ill and dying, and she had a story that she wanted to tell. Davis knew her well: for years he had been writing stories of her behind-the-scenes role in Coast politics. All San Francisco knew of her by now as a "mystery woman," as a person of an almost fabulous political past. Even so, when Davis called to see her she was living in poverty.

Sam Davis checked on her story. He hunted up Jason Brown, then living in California, and Jason said that it was true John Brown received a considerable sum of money from a colored woman in Chatham in 1858. Davis visited Sarah Brown, a daughter also living in California, and she too affirmed that John Brown had received a large sum from a colored woman at that time and place but he never revealed the woman's name. Davis wrote to Chatham, Canada, and learned that there was on file there a deed showing the transfer of property—four lots, in September of 1858, to Mary Pleasant, and there was another record again in 1872 when the

property was conveyed to James Handy, a San Francisco man.

Mrs. Pleasant said to Sam Davis, "I felt very bad over the failure of my mission, but I never regretted the time or the money I spent on the trip. It cost me, all told, about \$40,000. It seemed at first like a failure, but time proved that the money was well spent. It paved the way for the war and the war freed the slaves. I always felt that John Brown started the Civil War and that I helped Brown more than any other one person financially. I wish I had given more. When I die, all I want on my tombstone is: 'She was a friend of John Brown'."

Then came her death and burial: and if a tombstone was placed over her grave, with the inscription that she desired, there has been no sign of it in recent years.

As a "mystery" woman with a background reaching back into misty legend, "Mammy" Pleasant's career in California has caught the imagination of novelists, playwrights, and newspaper feature writers. There's Charles Dobie's *Less than Kin*, a romance with a "Mammy" Pleasant plot that has gone through several editions, and who has not seen "The Cat and the Canary" on the

legitimate stage or in one of its several movie productions? "Mammy" Pleasant is the black housekeeper who appears here and there when least expected, and it is this character that holds the lines of the popular old melodrama together.

But, as a character who exerted a powerful influence on affairs on the West Coast and on the anti-slavery contest in the east, she might have been neglected for all time except for one woman, a white woman who had a vague memory of "Mammy" Pleasant as she moved about San Francisco just before the close of the old lady's long life. Impelled by a great curiosity this writer, Mrs. Stella Ingrim Brown of San Jose, California, began to gather every scrap of information available about the activity of the colored woman who wielded power and wrought strongly three quarters of a century ago. The untimely death of Mrs. Brown a couple of years ago cut short the work on a definitive life of the most unusual Negro woman of the Pacific Coast, contemporary of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, though working in a different field.

Mr. Boyd B. Stutler, the historian who visited Mrs. Plea-

sant's grave, has thoroughly investigated her claims to association with John Brown, and he is convinced that she played a part in his campaign. In the *San Francisco Call* of January 13, 1904, there appeared an article describing the burial of Mrs. Pleas-

ant, and concluding, "Among her effects are letters and documents bearing upon the historical event in which she secretly played an important part." These papers are still extant, and some day doubtless, their contents will be revealed.

Old Lost John

"Old Lost John" known in its original state as "Long Gone," has passed from deadly seriousness to childish doggerel. The song describes an actual event. Long John, a convict, heard that a plan was afoot to try out the prison's new blood-hounds on him, and that he would be given the distance around the court house as a "handicap." Planning accordingly, he set a trap in a barrel, and when the leader of the hounds ran into the trap, the others stopped. Long John escaped.

Did you ever hear the story of Long
John Dean?

A bold bank robber from Bowling Green,
Was sent to the jailhouse yesterday,
Late last night he made his get away.

Long John stood on the railroad tie,
Waiting for a freight train to come by,
Freight train come just puffin' and flyin',
Ought-a seen Long John grabbin' that
blind.

He's Long Gone from Kentucky, Long
Gone ain't he lucky,
Long Gone and what I mean,
He's Long Gone from Bowling Green.

They offered a reward to bring him back,
Even put blood-hounds on his track,
Doggone blood-hounds lost his scent,
Now nobody knows where Long John
went.

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A later account has it . . .
Lost John made a pair of shoes of his
own, Best pair of shoes that ever was
bo'hn,
Heel in front and heel behind,
Couldn't tell which way lost John was
gwine
He's along, he's along gone.
—The Journal of American Folk-Lore.