

GEORGE FORTMAN

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“The story of my life, I will tell to you with sincerest respect to all and love to many, although reviewing the dark trail of my childhood and early youth causes me great pain.” So spoke George Fortman, an aged man and former slave, although the history of his life reveals that no Negro blood runs through his veins.

My story necessarily begins by relating events which occurred in 1838, when hundreds of Indians were rounded up like cattle and driven away from the valley of the Wabash. It is a well known fact recorded in the histories of Indiana that the long journey from the beautiful Wabash Valley was a horrible experience for the fleeing Indians, but I have the tradition as relating to my own family, and from this enforced flight ensued the tragedy of my birth.

The aged ex-slave reviews tradition. My two ancestors, John Hawk, a Blackhawk Indian brave, and Racheal, a Chackatau maiden had made themselves a home such as only Indians know, understand and enjoy. He was a hunter and a fighter but had professed faith in Christ through the influence of the missionaries. My great grandmother passed the facts on to her children and they have been handed down for four generations. I, in turn, have given the traditions to my children and grandchildren.

No more peaceful home had ever offered itself to the red man than the beautiful valley of the Wabash river. Giant elms, sycamores and maple trees bordered the stream while the fertile valley was traversed with creeks and rills, furnishing water in abundance for use of the Indian campers.

The Indians and the white settlers in the valley transacted business with each other and were friendly towards each other, as I have been told by my mother, Eliza, and my grandmother, Courtney Hawk.

The missionaries often called the Indian families together for the purpose of teaching them and the Indians had been invited, prior to being driven from the valley, to a sort of festival in the

woods. They had prepared much food for the occasion. The braves had gone on a long hunt to provide meat and the squaws had prepared much corn and other grain to be used at the feast. All the tribes had been invited to a council and the poor people were happy, not knowing they were being deceived.

The decoy worked, for while the Indians were worshiping God the meeting was rudely interrupted by orders of the Governor of the State. The Governor, whose duty it was to give protection to the poor souls, caused them to be taken captives and driven away at the point of swords and guns.

In vain, my grandmother said, the Indians prayed to be let return to their homes. Instead of being given their liberty, some several hundred horses and ponies were captured to be used in transporting the Indians away from the valley. Many of the aged Indians and many innocent children died on the long journey and traditional stories speak of that journey as the 'trail of death.'

After long weeks of flight, when the homes of the Indians had been reduced to ashes, the long trail still carried them away from their beautiful valley. My great grandfather and his squaw became acquainted with a party of Indians that were going to the canebrakes of Alabama. The pilgrims were not well fed or well clothed and they were glad to travel towards the south, believing the climate would be favorable to their health.

After a long and dreary journey, the Indians reached Alabama. Rachael had her youngest papoose strapped on to her back while John had cared for the larger child, Lucy. Sometimes she had walked beside her father but often she had become weary or sleepy and he had carried her many miles of the journey, besides the weight of blankets and food. An older daughter, Courtney, also accompanied her parents.

When they neared the cane lands they heard the songs of Negro slaves as they toiled in the cane. Soon they were in sight of the slave quarters of Patent George's plantation. The Negroes made the Indians welcome and the slave dealer allowed them to occupy the cane house; thus the Indians became slaves of Patent George.

Worn out from his long journey John Hawk became too ill to work in the sugar cane. The kindly-disposed Negroes helped care for the sick man but he lived only a few months. Rachel and her two children remained on the plantation, working with the other slaves. She had nowhere to go. No home to call her own. She had automatically become a slave. Her children had become chattel.

So passed a year away, then unhappiness came to the Indian mother, for her daughter, Courtney, became the mother of young Master Ford George's child. The parents called the little half-breed Eliza and were very fond of her. The widow of John Hawk became the mother of Patent George's son, Patent Junior.

The tradition of the family states that in spite of these irregular occurrences the people at the George's southern plantation were prosperous, happy, and lived in peace each with the others.

Patent George wearied of the Southern climate and brought his slaves into Kentucky where their ability and strength would amass a fortune for the master in the iron ore regions of Kentucky.

With the wagon trains of Patent and Ford George came Rachel Hawk and her daughters, Courtney, Lucy and Rachel. Rachel died on the journey from Alabama but the remaining full blooded Indians entered Kentucky as slaves.

The slave men soon became skilled workers in the Hillman Rolling Mills. Mr. Trigg was owner of the vast iron works called the Chimneys in the region, but listed as the Hillman, Dixon, Boyer, Kelley and Lyons Furnaces. For more than a half century these chimneys smoked as the most valuable development in the western area of Kentucky. Operated in 1810, these furnaces had refined iron ore to supply the United States Navy with cannon balls and grape shot, and the iron smelting industry continued until after the close of the Civil War.

No slaves were beaten at the George's plantation and old Mistress Hester Lam allowed no slave to be sold. She was a devoted friend to all.

As Eliza George, daughter of Ford George and Courtney Hawk, grew into young womanhood the young master Ford George went more often to social functions. He was admired for his skill with firearms and for his horsemanship. While Courtney and his child remained at the plantation Ford enjoyed the companionship of the beautiful women of the vicinity. At last he brought home the beautiful Loraine, his young bride. Courtney was stoical as only an Indian can be. She showed no hurt but helped Mistress Hester and Mistress Loraine with the housework.

Here George Fortman paused to let his blinded eyes look back into the long ago. Then he again continued with his story of the dark trail.

Mistress Loraine became mother of two sons and a daughter and the big white two-story house facing the Cumberland River at Smith Landing, Kentucky, became a place of laughter and happy occasions, so my mother told me many times.

Suddenly sorrow settled down over the home and the laughter turned into wailing, for Ford George's body was found pierced through the heart and the half-breed, Eliza, was nowhere to be found.

The young master's body lay in state for many days. Friends and neighbors came bringing flowers. His mother, bowed with grief, looked on the still face of her son and understood—understood why death had come and why Eliza had gone away.

The beautiful home on the Cumberland river with its more than 600 acres of productive land was put into the hands of an administrator of estates to be readjusted in the interest of the George heirs. It was only then Mistress Hester went to Aunt Lucy and demanded of her to tell where Eliza could be found.

'She has gone to Alabama, Ole Mistus', said Aunt Lucy, 'Eliza was scared to stay here.' A party of searchers were sent out to look for Eliza. They found her secreted in a canebrake in the lowlands of Alabama nursing her baby boy at her breast. They took Eliza and the baby back to Kentucky. I am that baby, that child of unsatisfactory birth.

The face of George Fortman registered sorrow and pain, it had been hard for him to retell the story of the dark road to strange ears.

My white uncles had told Mistress Hester that if Eliza brought me back they were going to build a fire and put me in it, my birth was so unsatisfactory to all of them, but Mistress Hester always did what she believed was right and I was brought up by my own mother.

We lived in a cabin at the slave quarters and mother worked in the broom cane. Mistress Hester named me Ford George, in derision, but remained my friend. She was never angry with my mother. She knew a slave had to submit to her master and besides Eliza did not know she was Master Ford George's daughter.

The truth had been told at last. The master was both the father of Eliza and the father of Eliza's son.

Mistress Hester believed I would be feeble either in mind or body because of my unsatisfactory birth, but I developed as other children did and was well treated by Mistress Hester, Mistress Lorainne and her children.

Master Patent George died and Mistress Hester married Mr. Lam, while slaves kept working at the rolling mills and amassing greater wealth for the George families.

Five years before the outbreak of the Civil War Mistress Hester called all the slaves together and gave us our freedom. Courtney, my grandmother, kept house for Mistress Lorainne and wanted to stay on, so I too was kept at the George home. There was a sincere friendship as great as the tie of blood between the white family and the slaves. My mother married a negro ex-slave of Ford George and bore children for him. Her health failed and when Mistress Puss, the only daughter of Mistress Lorainne, learned she was ill she persuaded the Negro man to sell his property and bring Eliza back to live with her.

[TR: in the following section the name George 'Fordman' is used twice.]

"Why are you called George Fordman when your name is Ford George?" was the question asked the old man.

Then the Freedmen started teaching school in Kentucky the census taker called to enlist me as a pupil. 'What do you call this child?' he asked Mistress Lorainne. 'We call him the Little Captain because he carried himself like a soldier,' said Mistress Lorainne. 'He is the son of my husband and a slave woman but we are rearing him.' Mistress Lorainne told the stranger that I had been named Ford George in derision and he suggested she list me in the census as George Fordsman, which she did, but she never allowed me to attend the Freedmen's School, desiring

to keep me with her own children and let me be taught at home. My mother's half brother, Patent George allowed his name to be reversed to George Patent when he enlisted in the Union Service at the outbreak of the Civil War.

Some customs prevalent in the earlier days were described by George Fordman. It was customary to conduct a funeral differently than it is conducted now, he said. I remember I was only six years old when old Mistress Hester Lam passed on to her eternal rest. She was kept out of her grave several days in order to allow time for the relatives, friends and ex-slaves to be notified of her death.

The house and yard were full of grieving friends. Finally the lengthy procession started to the graveyard. Within the Georges' parlors there had been Bible passages read, prayers offered up and hymns sung, now the casket was placed in a wagon drawn by two horses. The casket was covered with flowers while the family and friends rode in ox carts, horse-drawn wagons, horseback, and with still many on foot they made their way towards the river.

When we reached the river there were many canoes busy putting the people across, besides the ferry boat was in use to ferry vehicles over the stream. The ex-slaves were crying and praying and telling how good granny had been to all of them and explaining how they knew she had gone straight to Heaven, because she was so kind—and a Christian. There were not nearly enough boats to take the crowd across if they crossed back and forth all day, so my mother, Eliza, improvised a boat or 'gunnel', as the craft was called, by placing a wooden soap box on top of a long pole, then she pulled off her shoes and, taking two of us small children in her arms, she paddled with her feet and put us safely across the stream. We crossed directly above Iuka, Livingston county, three miles below Grand River.

At the burying ground a great crowd had assembled from the neighborhood across the river and there were more songs and prayers and much weeping. The casket was let down into the grave without the lid being put on and everybody walked up and looked into the grave at the face of the dead woman. They called it the 'last look' and everybody dropped flowers on Mistress Hester as they passed by. A man then went down and nailed on the lid and the earth was thrown in with shovels. The ex-slaves filled in the grave, taking turns with the shovel. Some of the men had worked at the smelting furnaces so long that their hands were twisted and hardened from contact with the heat. Their shoulders were warped and their bodies twisted but they were strong as iron men from their years of toil. When the funeral was over mother put us across the river on the gunnel and we went home, all missing Mistress Hester.

My cousin worked at Princeton, Kentucky, making shoes. He had never been notified that he was free by the kind emancipation Mrs. Hester had given to her slaves, and he came loaded with money to give to his white folks. Mistress Lorainne told him it was his own money to keep or to use, as he had been a free man several months.

As our people, white and black and Indians, sat talking they related how they had been warned of approaching trouble. Jack said the dogs had been howling around the place for many nights and that always presaged a death in the family. Jack had been compelled to take off his shoes

and turn them soles up near the hearth to prevent the howling of the dogs. Uncle Robert told how he believed some of Mistress Hester's enemies had planted a shrub near her door and planted it with a curse so that when the shrub bloomed the old woman passed away. Then another man told how a friend had been seen carrying a spade into his cousin's cabin and the cousin had said, 'Daniel, what for you brung that weapon into my cabin? That very spade will dig my grave,' and sure enough the cousin had died and the same spade had been used in digging his grave.

How my childish nature quailed at hearing the superstitions discussed, I cannot explain. I have never believed in witchcraft nor spells, but I remember my Indian grandmother predicted a long, cold winter when she noticed the pelts of the coons and other furred creatures were exceedingly heavy. When the breast bones of the fowls were strong and hard to sever with the knife it was a sign of a hard, cold and snowy winter. Another superstition was this: 'A green winter, a new graveyard—a white winter, a green graveyard.'

George Fordman relates how, when he accompanied two of his cousins into the lowlands—there were very many katydids in the trees—their voices formed a nerve-racking orchestra and his cousin told him to tiptoe to the trees and touch each tree with the tips of his fingers. This he did, and for the rest of the day there was quiet in the forest.

More than any other superstition entertained by the slave Negroes, the most harmful was the belief on conjurors. One old Negro woman boiled a bunch of leaves in an iron pot, boiled it with a curse and scattered the tea therein brewed, and firmly believed she was bringing destruction to her enemies. 'Wherever that tea is poured there will be toil and troubles,' said the old woman.

The religion of many slaves was mostly superstition. They feared to break the Sabbath, feared to violate any of the Commandments, believing that the wrath of God would follow immediately, blasting their lives.

Things changed at the George homestead as they change everywhere, said George Fortman. When the Civil War broke out many slaves enlisted in hopes of receiving freedom. The George Negroes were already free but many thought it their duty to enlist and fight for the emancipation of their fellow slaves. My mother took her family and moved away from the plantation and worked in the broom cane. Soon she discovered she could not make enough to rear her children and we were turned over to the court to be bound out.

I was bound out to David Varnell in Livingston County by order of Judge Busch and I stayed there until I was fifteen years of age. My sister learned that I was unhappy there and wanted to see my mother, so she influenced James Wilson to take me into his home. Soon goodhearted Jimmy Wilson took me to see Mother and I went often to see her.

Sometimes George would become stubborn and hard to control and then Mr. Wilson administered chastisement. His wife could not bear to have the boy punished. 'Don't hit him, Jimmie, don't kick him,' would say the good Scotch woman, who was childless. 'If he does not

obey me I will whip him,' James Wilson would answer. So the boy learned the lesson of obedience from the old couple and learned many lessons in thrift through their examples.

In 1883 I left the Wilson home and began working and trying to save some money. River trade was prosperous and I became a 'Roustabout'. The life of the roustabout varied some with the habits of the roustabout and the disposition of the mate. We played cards, shot dice and talked to the girls who always met the boats. The 'Whistling Coon' was a popular song with the boatmen and one version of 'Dixie Land'. One song we often sang when near a port was worded 'Hear the trumpet Sound'—