

JOHN JASPER

**The Unmatched Negro
Philosopher and Preacher**

By
WILLIAM E. HATCHER

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INTRODUCTION

Reader; stay a moment. A word with you before you begin to sample this book. We will tell you some things in advance, which may help you to decide whether it is worth while to read any further. These pages deal with a negro, and are not designed either to help or to hurt the negro race. They have only to do with one man. He was one of a class,—without pedigree, and really without successors, except that he was so dominant and infectious that numbers of people affected his ways and dreamed that they were one of his sort. As a fact, they were simply of another and of a baser sort.

The man in question was a negro, and if you cannot appreciate greatness in a black skin you would do well to turn your thoughts into some other channel. Moreover, he was a negro covered over with ante bellum habits and ways of doing. He lived forty years before the war and for about forty years after it. He grew wonderfully as a freeman; but he never grew away from the tastes, dialects, and manners of the bondage times. He was a man left over from the old régime and never got infected with the new order. The air of the educated negro preacher didn't set well upon him. The raw scholarship of the new "ish," as he called it, was sounding brass to him. As a fact, the new generation of negro preachers sent out by the schools drew back from this man. They branded him as an anachronism, and felt that his presence in the pulpit was a shock to religion and an offense to the ministry; and yet not one of them ever attained the celebrity or achieved the results which came to this unlettered and grievously ungrammatical son of Africa.

But do not be afraid that you are to be fooled into the fanatical camp. This story comes from the pen of a Virginian who claims no exemption from Southern prejudices and feels no call to sound the praises of the negro race. Indeed, he never intended to write what is contained within the covers of this book. It grew up spontaneously and most of the contents were written before the book was thought of.

It is, perhaps, too much to expect that the meddlers with books will take the *ipse dixit* of an unaccredited stranger. They ought not to do it: they are not asked to do it. They can go on about their business, if they prefer; but if they do, they will miss the story of the incomparable negro of the South. This is said with sobriety and after a half century spent in close observation of the negro race.

More than that, the writer of this never had any intention of bothering with this man when he first loomed up into notoriety. He got drawn in unexpectedly. He heard that there was a marvel of a man "over in Africa," a not too savoury portion of Richmond, Virginia,—and one Sunday afternoon in company with a Scot-Irishman, who was a scholar and a critic, with a strong leaning towards ridicule, he went to hear him preach. Shades of our Anglo-Saxon fathers! Did mortal lips ever gush with such torrents of horrible English! Hardly a word came out clothed and in its right mind. And gestures! He circled around the pulpit with his ankle in his hand; and laughed and sang and shouted and acted about a dozen characters within the space of three minutes. Meanwhile, in spite of these things, he was pouring out a gospel sermon, red hot, full of love, full of invective, full of tenderness, full of bitterness, full of tears, full of every passion that ever flamed in the human breast. He was a theatre within himself, with the stage crowded with actors. He was a battle-field;—himself the general, the staff,

the officers, the common soldiery, the thundering artillery and the rattling musketry. He was the preacher; likewise the church and the choir and the deacons and the congregation. The Scot-Irishman surrendered in fifteen minutes after the affair commenced, but the other man was hard-hearted and stubborn and refused to commit himself. He preferred to wait until he got out of doors and let the wind blow on him and see what was left. He determined to go again; and he went and kept going, off and on, for twenty years. That was before the negro became a national figure. It was before he startled his race with his philosophy as to the rotation of the sun. It was before he became a lecturer and a sensation, sought after from all parts of the country. Then it was that he captured the Scot-Irish and the other man also. What is written here constitutes the gatherings of nearly a quarter of a century, and, frankly speaking, is a tribute to the brother in black,—the one unmatched, unapproachable, and wonderful brother.

But possibly the reader is of the practical sort. He would like to get the worldly view of this African genius and to find out of what stuff he was made. Very well; he will be gratified! Newspapers are heartlessly practical. They are grudging of editorial commendation, and in Richmond, at the period, they were sparing of references of any kind to negroes. You could hardly expect them to say anything commendatory of a negro, if he was a negro, with odd and impossible notions. Now this man was of that very sort. He got it into his big skull that the earth was flat, and that the sun rotated;—a scientific absurdity! But you see he proved it by the Bible. He ransacked the whole book and got up ever so many passages. He took them just as he found them. It never occurred to him that the Bible was not dealing with natural science, and that it was written in an age and country when astronomy was unknown and therefore

written in the language of the time. Intelligent people understand this very well, but this miracle of his race was behind his era. He took the Bible literally, and, with it in hand, he fought his battles about the sun. Literally, but not scientifically, he proved his position, and he gave some of his devout antagonists a world of botheration by the tenacity with which he held to his views and the power with which he stated his case. Scientifically, he was one of the ancients, but that did not interfere with his piety and did not at all eclipse his views. His perfect honesty was most apparent in all of his contentions; and, while some laughed at what they called his vagaries, those who knew him best respected him none the less, but rather the more, for his astronomical combat. There was something in his love of the Bible, his faith in every letter of it, and his courage, that drew to him the good will and lofty respect of uncounted thousands and, probably, it might be said, of uncounted millions.

Now when this man died it was as the fall of a tower. It was a crash, heard and felt farther than was the collapse of the famous tower at Venice. If the dubious, undecided reader has not broken down on the road but has come this far, he is invited to look at the subjoined editorial from *The Richmond Dispatch*, the leading morning paper of Richmond, Va., which published at the time an article on this lofty figure, now national in its proportions and imperishable in its fame, when it bowed to the solemn edict of death.

(From The Richmond Dispatch)

“It is a sad coincidence that the destruction of the Jefferson Hotel and the death of the Rev. John Jasper should have fallen upon the same day. John Jasper was a Richmond Institution, as surely so as

was Major Ginter's fine hotel. He was a national character, and he and his philosophy were known from one end of the land to the other. Some people have the impression that John Jasper was famous simply because he flew in the face of the scientists and declared that the sun moved. In one sense, that is true, but it is also true that his fame was due, in great measure, to a strong personality, to a deep, earnest conviction, as well as to a devout Christian character. Some preachers might have made this assertion about the sun's motion without having attracted any special attention. The people would have laughed over it, and the incident would have passed by as a summer breeze. But John Jasper made an impression upon his generation, because he was sincerely and deeply in earnest in all that he said. No man could talk with him in private, or listen to him from the pulpit, without being thoroughly convinced of that fact. His implicit trust in the Bible and everything in it, was beautiful and impressive. He had no other lamp by which his feet were guided. He had no other science, no other philosophy. He took the Bible in its literal significance; he accepted it as the inspired word of God; he trusted it with all his heart and soul and mind; he believed nothing that was in conflict with the teachings of the Bible—scientists and philosophers and theologians to the contrary notwithstanding.

“‘They tried to make it appear,’ said he, in the last talk we had with him on the subject, ‘that John Jasper was a fool and a liar when he said that the sun moved. I paid no attention to it at first, because I did not believe that the so-called scientists were in earnest. I did not think that there was any man in the world fool enough to believe that the sun did *not* move, for everybody had seen it move. But when I found that these so-called scientists were in earnest I took down my old Bible and proved that they, and not John Jasper,

were the fools and the liars.’ And there was no more doubt in his mind on that subject than there was of his existence. John Jasper had the faith that removed mountains. He knew the literal Bible as well as Bible scholars did. He did not understand it from the scientific point of view, but he knew its teachings and understood its spirit, and he believed in it. He accepted it as the true word of God, and he preached it with unction and with power.

“John Jasper became famous by accident, but he was a most interesting man apart from his solar theory. He was a man of deep convictions, a man with a purpose in life, a man who earnestly desired to save souls for heaven. He followed his divine calling with faithfulness, with a determination, as far as he could, to make the ways of his God known unto men, His saving health among all nations. And the Lord poured upon His servant, Jasper, ‘the continual dew of His blessing.’”

I

JASPER PRESENTED

John Jasper, the negro preacher of Richmond, Virginia, stands preëminent among the preachers of the negro race in the South. He was for fifty years a slave, and a preacher during twenty-five years of his slavery, and distinctly of the old plantation type. Freedom came full-handed to him, but it did not in any notable degree change him in his style, language, or manner of preaching. He was the ante bellum preacher until eighty-nine years of age, when he preached his last sermon on "Regeneration," and with quiet dignity laid off his mortal coil and entered the world invisible. He was the last of his type, and we shall not look upon his like again. It has been my cherished purpose for some time to embalm the memory of this extraordinary genius in some form that would preserve it from oblivion. I would give to the American people a picture of the God-made preacher who was great in his bondage and became immortal in his freedom.

This is not to be done in biographic form, but rather in vagrant articles which find their kinship only in the fact that they present some distinct view of a man, hampered by early limitations, denied the graces of culture, and cut off even from the advantages of a common education, but who was munificently endowed by nature, filled with vigour and self-reliance, and who achieved greatness in spite of almost limitless adversities. I account him genuinely great among the sons of men, but I am quite sure that the public can never apprehend the force and gist of his rare manhood without

first being made acquainted with certain facts appertaining to his early life.

Jasper was born a slave. He grew up on a plantation and was a toiler in the fields up to his manhood. When he came to Richmond, now grown to a man, he was untutored, full of dangerous energies, almost gigantic in his muscle, set on pleasure, and without the fear of God before his eyes. From his own account of himself, he was fond of display, a gay coxcomb among the women of his race, a fun-maker by nature, with a self-assertion that made him a leader within the circles of his freedom.

We meet him first as one of the “hands” in the tobacco factory of Mr. Samuel Hargrove, an enterprising and prosperous manufacturer in the city of Richmond. Jasper occupied the obscure position of “a stemmer,”—which means that his part was to take the well-cured tobacco leaf and eliminate the stem, with a view to preparing what was left to be worked into “the plug” which is the glory of the tobacco-chewer. This position had one advantage for this quick-witted and alert young slave. It threw him into contact with a multitude of his own race, and as nature had made him a lover of his kind his social qualities found ample scope for exercise. In his early days he went at a perilous pace and found in the path of the sinful many fountains of common joy. Indeed, he made evil things fearfully fascinating by the zestful and remorseless way in which he indulged them.

It was always a joy renewed for him to tell the story of his conversion. As described by him, his initial religious experiences, while awfully mystical and solemn to him, were grotesque and ludicrous enough. They partook of the extravagances of the times, yet were so honest in their nature, and so soundly Scriptural in

their doctrines, and so reverential in their tone, that not even the most captious sceptic could hear him tell of them, in his moments of exalted inspiration, without feeling profoundly moved by them.

It ought to be borne in mind that this odd and forcible man was a preacher in Richmond for a half century, and that during all that time, whether in slavery or in freedom, he lived up to his religion, maintaining his integrity, defying the unscrupulous efforts of jealous foes to destroy him, and walking the high path of spotless and incorruptible honour. Not that he was always popular among his race. He was too decided, too aggressive, too intolerant towards meanness, and too unpitying in his castigation of vice, to be popular. His life, in the nature of the case, had to be a warfare, and it may be truly said that he slept with his sword buckled on.

Emancipation did not turn his head. He was the same high-minded, isolated, thoughtful Jasper. His way of preaching became an offense to the “educated” preachers of the new order, and with their new sense of power these double-breasted, Prince-Albert-coated, high hat and kid-gloved clergymen needed telescopes to look as far down as Jasper was, to get a sight of him. They verily thought that it would be a simple process to transfix him with their sneers, and flaunt their new grandeurs before him, in order to annihilate him. Many of these new-fledged preachers, who came from the schools to be pastors in Richmond, resented Jasper’s prominence and fame. They felt that he was a reproach to the race, and they did not fail to fling at him their flippant sneers.

But Jasper’s mountain stood strong. He looked this new tribe of his adversaries over and marked them as a calcimined and fictitious type of culture. To him they were shop-made and unworthy of respect. They called forth the storm of his indignant wrath. He

opened his batteries upon them, and, for quite a while, the thunder of his guns fairly shook the steeples on the other negro churches of Richmond. And yet it will never do to think of him as the incarnation of a vindictive and malevolent spirit. He dealt terrific blows, and it is hardly too much to say that many of his adversaries found it necessary to get out of the range of his guns. But, after all, there was a predominant good nature about him. His humour was inexhaustible, and irresistible as well. If by his fiery denunciations he made his people ready to “fight Philip,” he was quite apt before he finished to let fly some of his odd comparisons, his laughable stories, or his humorous mimics. He could laugh off his own grievances, and could make his own people “take the same medicine.”

Jasper was something of a hermit, given to seclusion, imperturbably calm in his manner, quite ascetic in his tastes, and a cormorant in his devouring study of the Bible. Naturally, Jasper was as proud as Lucifer,—too proud to be egotistic and too candid and self-assertive to affect a humility which he did not feel. He walked heights where company was scarce, and seemed to love his solitude. Jasper was as brave as a lion and possibly not a little proud of his bravery. He fought in the open and set no traps for his adversaries. He believed in himself,—felt the dignity of his position, and never let himself down to what was little or unseemly.

The most remarkable fact in Jasper’s history is connected with his extraordinary performances in connection with his tersely expressed theory,—THE SUN DO MOVE! We would think in advance that any man who would come forward to champion that view would be hooted out of court. It was not so with Jasper. His bearing through all that excitement was so dignified, so sincere, so consistent and heroic, that he actually did win the rank of a true

philosopher. This result, so surprising, is possibly the most handsome tribute to his inherent excellence and nobility of character. One could not fail to see that his fight on a technical question was so manifestly devout, so filled with zeal for the honour of religion, and so courageous in the presence of overwhelming odds, that those who did not agree with him learned to love and honour him.

The sensation which he awakened fairly flew around the country. It is said that he preached the sermon 250 times, and it would be hard to estimate how many thousands of people heard him. The papers, religious and secular, had much to say about him. Many of them published his sermons, some of them at first plying him with derision, but about all of them rounding up with the admission of a good deal of faith in Jasper. So vast was his popularity that a mercenary syndicate once undertook to traffic on his popularity by sending him forth as a public lecturer. The movement proved weak on its feet, and after a little travel he hobbled back richer in experience than in purse.

As seen in the pulpit or in the street Jasper was an odd picture to look upon. His figure was uncouth; he was rather loosely put together; his limbs were fearfully long and his body strikingly short,—a sort of nexus to hold his head and limbs in place. He was black, but his face saved him. It was open, luminous, thoughtful, and in moments of animation it glowed with a radiance and exultation that was most attractive.

Jasper's career as a preacher after the war was a poem. The story is found later on and marks him as a man of rare originality, and of patience born of a better world. He left a church almost entirely the creation of his own productive life, that holds a high rank in

Richmond and that time will find it hard to estrange from his spirit and influence. For quite a while he was hardly on coöperative terms with the neighbouring churches, and it is possible that he ought to share somewhat in the responsibility for the estrangement which so long existed;—though it might be safely said that if they had left Jasper alone he would not have bothered them. Let it be said that the animosities of those days gradually gave away to the gracious and softening influence of time, and, when his end came, all the churches and ministers of the city most cordially and lovingly united in honouring his memory.

It may betoken the regard in which Jasper was held by the white people if I should be frank enough to say that I was the pastor of the Grace Street Baptist Church, one of the largest ecclesiastical bodies in the city at the time of Jasper's death, and the simple announcement in the morning papers that I would deliver an address in honour of this negro preacher who had been carried to his grave during the previous week brought together a representative and deeply sympathetic audience which overflowed the largest church auditorium in the city. With the utmost affection and warmth I put forth my lofty appreciation of this wonderful prince of his tribe, and so far as known there was never an adverse criticism offered as to the propriety or justice of the tribute which was paid him.

It is of this unusual man, this prodigy of his race, and this eminent type of the Christian negro, that the somewhat random articles of this volume are to treat. His life jumped the common grooves and ran on heights not often trod. His life went by bounds and gave surprises with each succeeding leap.

II

JASPER HAS A THRILLING CONVERSION

Let us bear in mind that at the time of his conversion John Jasper was a slave, illiterate and working in a tobacco factory in Richmond. It need hardly be said that he shared the superstitions and indulged in the extravagances of his race, and these in many cases have been so blatant and unreasonable that they have caused some to doubt the negro's capacity for true religion. But from the beginning Jasper's religious experiences showed forth the Lord Jesus as their source and centre. His thoughts went to the Cross. His hope was founded on the sacrificial blood, and his noisy and rhapsodic demonstrations sounded a distinct note in honour of his Redeemer.

Jasper's conviction as to his call to the ministry was clear-cut and intense. He believed that his call came straight from God. His boast and glory was that he was a God-made preacher. In his fierce warfares with the educated preachers of his race—"the new issue," as he contemptuously called them—he rested his claim on the ground that God had put him into the ministry; and so reverential, so full of noble assertion and so irresistibly eloquent was he in setting forth his ministerial authority that even his most sceptical critics were constrained to admit that, like John the Baptist, he was "a man sent from God."

And yet Jasper knew the human side of his call. It was a part of his greatness that he could see truth in its relations and completeness, and while often he presented one side of a truth, as if it were all of it, he also saw the other side. With him a paradox was not a

contradiction. He gratefully recognized the human influences which helped him to enter the ministry. While preaching one Sunday afternoon Jasper suddenly stopped, his face lighted as with a vision, a rich laugh rippled from his lips while his eyes flashed with soulful fire. He then said, in a manner never to be reported: “Mars Sam Hargrove called me to preach de Gospel—he was my old marster, and he started me out wid my message.” Instantly the audience quivered with quickened attention, for they knew at once that the man in the pulpit had something great to tell.

“I was seekin’ God six long weeks—jes’ ’cause I was sich a fool I couldn’t see de way. De Lord struck me fus’ on Cap’tal Squar’, an’ I left thar badly crippled. One July mornin’ somethin’ happen’d. I was a tobarker-stemmer—dat is, I took de tobarker leaf, an’ tor’d de stem out, an’ dey won’t no one in dat fac’ry could beat me at dat work. But dat mornin’ de stems wouldn’t come out to save me, an’ I tor’d up tobarker by de poun’ an’ flung it under de table. Fac’ is, bruthr’n, de darkness of death was in my soul dat mornin’. My sins was piled on me like mount’ns; my feet was sinkin’ down to de reguns of despar, an’ I felt dat of all sinners I was de wust. I tho’t dat I would die right den, an’ wid what I supposed was my lars breath I flung up to heav’n a cry for mercy. ’Fore I kno’d it, de light broke; I was light as a feather; my feet was on de mount’n; salvation rol’d like a flood thru my soul, an’ I felt as if I could ’nock off de fac’ry roof wid my shouts.

“But I sez to mysef, I gwine to hol’ still till dinner, an’ so I cried, an’ laffed, an’ tore up de tobarker. Pres’ntly I looked up de table, an’ dar was a old man—he luv me, an’ tried hard to lead me out de darkness, an’ I slip roun’ to whar he was, an’ I sez in his ear as low as I could: ‘Hallelujah; my soul is redeemed!’ Den I jump back quick to my work, but after I once open my mouf it was hard to

keep it shet any mo'. 'Twan' long 'fore I looked up de line agin, an' dar was a good ol' woman dar dat knew all my sorrers, an' had been prayin' fur me all de time. Der was no use er talkin'; I had to tell her, an' so I skip along up quiet as a breeze, an' start'd to whisper in her ear, but just den de holin-back straps of Jasper's breachin' broke, an' what I tho't would be a whisper was loud enuf to be hearn clean 'cross Jeems River to Manchester. One man sed he tho't de factory was fallin' down; all I know'd I had raise my fust shout to de glory of my Redeemer.

“But for one thing thar would er been a jin'ral revival in de fact'ry dat mornin'. Dat one thing was de overseer. He bulg'd into de room, an' wid a voice dat sounded like he had his breakfus dat mornin' on rasps an' files, bellowed out: ‘What's all dis row 'bout?’ Somebody shouted out dat John Jasper dun got religion, but dat didn't wurk 'tall wid de boss. He tell me to git back to my table, an' as he had sumpthin' in his hand dat looked ugly, it was no time fur makin' fine pints, so I sed: ‘Yes, sir, I will; I ain't meant no harm; de fus taste of salvation got de better un me, but I'll git back to my work.’ An' I tell you I got back quick.

“Bout dat time Mars Sam he come out'n his orfis, an' he say: ‘What's de matter out here?’ An' I hear de overseer tellin' him: ‘John Jasper kick up a fuss, an' say he dun got religion, but I dun fix him, an' he got back to his table.’ De devil tol' me to hate de overseer dat mornin', but de luv of God was rollin' thru my soul, an' somehow I didn't mind what he sed.

“Little aft'r I hear Mars Sam tell de overseer he want to see Jasper. Mars Sam was a good man; he was a Baptis', an' one of de hed men of de old Fust Church down here, an' I was glad when I hear Mars Sam say he want to see me. When I git in his orfis, he say:

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