

[The Story of Katy Brumby]

Alabama

[? Drawn by Negro?]

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Editorial Dept.

[? material?] [? well written?]

THE STORY OF KATY BRUMBY

Scruggs Alley, in Birmingham, runs east and west from 24th to 26th St. South. Like most other [?] [alleys?] in the city it is lined with small, gray, unpainted houses; like them it is dusty and dirty in dry weather, muddy in wet. Yet different from them, because it is more like a country lane. At the bend in the alley there are trees, and nearly every house in the Spring and Summer has its flowers growing in front and its vegetables in back. In Winter, however, it seems poverty-stricken and deserted with its trees bare, its flowers gone, and with only a few thin streams of smoke coming from chimneys here and there. The Negroes who live there are generally from the country, most of them from around Montgomery, Selma, or smaller towns in south Alabama.

Katy Brumby is one of these. She lives in a house just where the alley bends from 26th toward 24th St., and there has her flowers and vegetables. Katy refuses to tell her age, but a guess would place her in the fifties. She is short and fat with expressive hands, and streaks of grey in her hair. Her face is smooth, but with deep lines between her eyes and lines running from the corner of her nose to her mouth - lines of laughter as well as sorrow, for Katy has a magnificent sense of the ridiculous: while I was getting her story she would, from time to time, break into laughter at the memory of some long past comic scene. She

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dresses neatly always and in quiet colors. She has been working for us my family for nearly seventeen years.

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Katy grew up in Mount Meigs, a small town 12 miles east of Montgomery. There were eight or nine children in the family, of which and Katy was the oldest. Those who have not died have scattered over the country. Several remain in Montgomery or Mount Meigs, but there is a sister in Florida and a brother in Indiana. When Katy was small the family rented on Miss Emma's farm, but Katy hardly remembers it, except that her father told her Miss Emma was a good landlord. Then her family moved to Dr. N—'s place. "He's a plantation doctor; he sho wuz a good man." she says. "He saved my sister's life-dat's Lucy, in Florida - from de typhoid. He had some trees, peaches, you know. On'y way he'd make Lucy take medicine wuz to promise her some of his peaches. He's a good man, but he died with cancer of de nose."

The farm was a good way from Mount Meigs. Katy is very proud of Mount Meigs. "It's a real, small village. We's got an undertaker now, not the horse-pulling kind. Used to have to go to Mon'gomery. Mount Meigs is a nice place, not out in de sticks like Greensboro where Victoria come from." Victoria is a neighbor in Scruggs Alley.).

Her father, too, was a good man, a "good provider" for his family. "He never uz sick, till he died. He's a good farmer. We raised everything to eat but grain. Great big onions, and greens, and rutabagas and all. My Daddy banked turnip roots and rutabagas jus' like potatoes. Don' you know what 'banking' is? You see, he take pine straw - pine trees what grow down there, you know - and he'd shape it up round de turnip roots and rutabagas" - she demonstrated with her short, brown hands "and then he'd shovel dirt around 'em until dey's jus' a little hole at de top so's we could reach 'em out. Sometimes those 3 turnips by sprouted jus' like dey wuz growing." I asked about meat. "We had cows - beef, you know, and pigs, and all kinds of fowl. Chickens, guineas, turkeys, two kinds of duck, ev'rything but geese; we couldn't raise dem." The money crop was cotton, and they raised lots of

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it, but at the same time raised all their food except "grain" which they could buy in town. Katy's family was not in the plight of so many tenant farmers. There was little sickness in the family, and there was plenty of food, even turnips "banked" against the coming winter.

Katy can read and write; but that was not all she learned at school. She had the inestimable advantage of being under a woman like Georgia Washington. For also in Mount Meigs was Miss Georgia's school, which continued under her direction until just a few years ago. As Katy remembers, the tuition was \$10 for the term. She was unable, however, to pay all of that, so she cleaned Miss Georgia's room for the remainder, and thus had a personal relationship with her which was closer than that of teacher and pupil. Her talk now is larded with Miss Georgia's expressions, all simple and all wise. For instance, when she passes the vegetables for a second time, Katy will say, "Miss Georgia say you already got plenty when you want jus' a little bit more." Katy was taught other things besides book learning. Absolute cleanliness for one: the small girl was not allowed to wear pig-tails as the other children did for Miss Georgia said they weren't cleanly. Today Katy keeps not only a clean kitchen, but her own home and person are scrupulously clean.

Katy was in the eighth grade at school when she stopped.

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Her father died about that time. He had never before been ill. He was taken with what Katy calls "flying rheumatism" which affected his heart. "My Mother uz living, but she couldn't even go to de funeral. She's in bed. She had three strokes, but she's finally took with de eight-day penumonia, you know she's sick eight days befo' she died. It uz a year after my Daddy died dat I's married to Joe Brumby and come to Birmin'ham." Joe is from Mount Meigs, too. "He wus a land scape," she said. "He don' like to work indoors. He buttled once but he don' like it. A man down in Mount Meigs - a white man, you know - taught him landscape. He's a good one, too.

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“We come to Birmin'ham de first year dey sent soldiers across, nineteen-sixteen, seventeen, I don' remember. I worked for de Levy's, de first people I worked for, five-six years; then I worked for de Moores and de Jenkins. Then I come to work for y'all, near'bout seventeen years back.” So Katy has left the country for good; she looks back on the life with, I think, some longing; she says though that she wouldn't like it now after living in the city so long.

She and Joe had no children, and somewhere along the line they separated. “I found out I's not getting any place with him.” Joe is still devoted to Katy. For many years he tried to persuade her to come back to him, but she was sure the single life was the better. Even now he often comes for her after work or performs other services.

Katy has worked for us continually except for a short 5 period during the depression. The first years she was here, she went to night school at the Industrial High School. “Louise (a cook who works across the street still goes. I'd go, but it's too far 'cross town. Dey didn't teach me nothing new, jus' refreshed what I had befo'. I got promoted to de eighth grade, and dat's where I wus at Miss Georgia's befo' I married Joe Brumby.”

During the depression we and Katy separated; she went on relief. She applied to the DPW at the same time. “Dey wuz a nice young white boy there. He sho wuz nice. He tol' me he'd try an' get me a job. I wuz dressed in my good white uniform, an' I guess I looked real nice. I tol' him I's a cook, an' he said did I nurse. I tol' him, ‘Well, I jus' tell you, I don' like to nurse one bit. I don', not one bit.”

Se would have preferred a job cooking, because she both likes it and is proud of her proficiency at it. It is the only part of domestic service that she really does like. Her great talent is in cooking plain food deliciously. People have asked her for recipes, but it is impossible to give them, for she cooks by instinct as much as by recipe.

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She didn't get a job as a cook, however. She went on relief. Evidently her intelligence made an immediate impression, for she was put in charge of a sewing room. "I can't do nothing but plain sewing, and all I had to do uz watch de other folks. Dey made dolls and toys and things. Then dey transferred me where dey's doing fancy sewing, embroidery you know. I sho wuz scared 'cause I wouldn't know if dey did it wrong." Eventually they let her off, telling her, she says, that we had a little work for her. "Now I know y'all didn't have no work for me, so I jus' didn't come by." This was true; 6 we had said nothing to the authorities.

Just before Thanksgiving 1936, Katy came by to bring us some flowers and to borrow some money. By then both we and Katy realized our mistake in parting, and Katy left with her money and her job.

Her friend, Susy, to whom she is most helpful with food, money if needed, and other service, says, "Katy's good to dem she likes." This is true. Among her neighbors she has her likes and dislikes, and acts accordingly. Yet even those she dislikes, she will defend. "Aw, don' mind him, he don' mean no harm," she said of a particularly grumpy old man across the alley. She is certainly good to her family, especially to those in the country who need it most. She sends clothes to them when possible and does all she can. "I'm de oldest, and dey needs it bad, Miss Mary. Dey got children, I haven't."

Of course, what she can do is not too much. Katy's pay is \$6.00 a week. (This is pretty good pay for a cook in Birmingham and speaks its own message of conditions among this section of the population, which may, for some, be alleviated by what is called "Southern paternalism"). Out of this she must buy fuel in the Winter, pay for her insurance, clothe herself (except for uniforms), and pay rent of \$4.00 a month. A further small expense is due to the fact that Katy works and is single. Without members of the family to do it for her, she must pay neighbors to do much of her washing and house-cleaning. "It sho does take

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de money out of yo' pocket. I pay dem 50¢0 to clean and dat's too much for jus' two little old rooms.”

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Essentials, which she cannot afford, such as bifocal glasses, are taken care of. She is seldom ill, unless with a cold, or, as recently, with a sprained ankle; so that almost none of her income goes for doctor's bills. She eats at her place of work, so that her diet is as well - or ill-balanced as our own.

In Scruggs Alley she lives in one-half of a house. She has sown her two-by-four (almost literally) front yard with Winter grass, which struggles up through the hard-packed black earth in patches. Steps bisect the front porch, and two doors lead off the porch, the one on the right to Katy's two rooms where she lives alone except for the occasional visit of a niece from Montgomery or Mount Meigs. A bed, a stove, an old victrola, and a radio that doesn't work are the main furnishings. In the back yard she grows a few vegetables and flowers, greens and dahlias, onions and zinnias. (Katy' has “green fingers”; around the house she can make things grow as none of us can. She has made potatoes, sweet and Irish, sprout in water where we have never been able to.) She says folks in the alley take her flowers and her vegetables, especially the tender Spring onions, because she's away all day. “I'm gonna stop working an' take care of my things someday,” she says. “Y'all be sorry then.” Everything at her home is kept in strict order and is very clean. She does not have a bathroom; there is only an outdoor privy shared by several families. “Dat's bad,” she said, “Dat ain't right.” She said, too, that the landlord doesn't make the improvements he ought and doesn't keep up his property as he should.

Katy is well-informed on world events through the morning 8 and evening newspapers which she reads every day. If she doesn't have time on the place she takes them home with her at night, Except for an occasional word with which she is unfamiliar, she has no trouble, and she can be heard after breakfast - before the dishes are washed - reading aloud to herself in a mumbling tone as she drinks her coffee. During the Czechoslovakian

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crisis in the Fall she listened to everything we could get on the radio, even to Hitler's speeches. Anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany has somewhat upset her, perhaps because of her fondness for the Jewish family for whom she first worked. She told us one day of a rumor which was circulating among the Negroes. "Dey say dey is going to send all us colored folks back to Africa." I said that perhaps it got started due to the Jewish persecution and the talk of sending the refugees to Africa. Katy misunderstood. "Now, Miss Mary, don' talk thataway about dem poor people dey has such a hard time." I explained, "Dat's all right, den," she said.

About national events her opinions are not so sure. She thinks there are too many people on relief that don't need it. "I knows lots of folks on dere who don' need it," she says. She thinks highly of the people with whom she came into contact when she was on relief, the people to whom she applied. "Dey wuz all nice to me." She likes to listen to the President over the radio, "Law," she said, giggling, "I'd rather hear him dan read it. I gets sleepy." Her opinions are often quite conservative, or at least out of line with what one would expect, "I don' like this Conference dey had here. Dey gets folks all upset like."

Katy does not have the vote; there are laws in the South 9 which pretty effectively disenfranchise the Negro. "We wuz disfranchised way back; my Daddy tol' me all about it. Sometimes I don' see why dey treat colored folks de way dey do." Disenfranchisement isn't all. "Dey used to let us go to de Alabama (a motion picture theater) but not now. We can't go to none of dem places." We were listening, one day, to Marian Anderson, the Negro contralto singing over the radio. After the rich dark voice had stopped, I said I'd heard she was coming to Birmingham for a concert in the Spring.

"I don' guess dey'll let us hear it."

"Surely—." we murmured, but were not so sure.

Katy has all day Thursday off, except for cooking breakfast; the same on Sunday, except that breakfast is much later; and most legal holidays, including Christmas and New Year's.

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Her time off she spends in going to town, or even more usually in cleaning her house, washing her hair, or washing clothes. She goes to very few movies. Occasionally she hears one of the Negro swing orchestras that play at the Negro Masonic Temple one night, at the City's Auditorium the next. When the circus is in town, she attends that. More often her recreation is with her friends. For Christmas she bought a gallon of wine to entertain them with. Although Katy is religious, she doesn't disapprove of drinking or smoking, and herself both drinks and smokes. She does disapprove of work on Sunday. It is, for her, the Sabbath, the day of rest, indeed.

Katy's and our relationship os a happy one. But she had complaints. She actively dislikes for us to have company for meals, and her constant threat is, "Y'all be sorry when I goes to Mon'gomery. 10 My sister wants me to live with dem. Y'all be sorry." All this hardly above a mutter as she takes a pan from the [?] oven; -the sight and the smell of which make your mouth water,-sets something to soak in the sink, and orders you out of the kitchen. Her chief complaint is that she has too much work to do. "Y'all just got one somebody to do all de work. Need two somebodies." Katy is getting older and cannot do what she did when younger; her weight, too, is a handicap.

She tells us, when the atmosphere is better, of the superstitions of her people. She says, "Don't= step over working tools (in this case, the vacuum cleaner) bad luck come 'yo' way." It's bad lack to be swept by a broom. The remedy is, to kiss the broom. Opening an umbrella indoors is bad luck. "Old folks," Katy says, "believed in all dem things. I don' carry with dem much." The believers are always the old folks, but Katy obeys the ritual. After stepping over a "working tool," she will step backward over it; she kisses the broom; she throws salt over her shoulder. The old folks told her, "'de first twelve days of de first month, dey represent de months of de year, and de kind of weather for dem times.' Of co'se, sometimes dey borrows one for de other," Katy said. "Now yestiddy, de third, wuz a good April day, and all this wind today, it's a good March day. So dey borrows it."

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Katy is loyal above all persons I know, and absolutely an individual. She is not only a friend, but a member of the family, which, despite the accusation of “paternalism,” is the only way to describe a relationship at once so intricate and so simple. 11 Katy as a person, I have said, has a magnificent sense of the ridiculous. But what seems to remain is the undertone of the sorrow of the race. It is, 'dat ain't right;’ it is, “Why do dey treat colored folks dat way?”: it is the haunting tone of sorrow that remains in the spirituals after the often comic surface has been forgotten.

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