FICTION FROM THE AFRO ARCHIVES

Have A Little Faith

A warm and tender story of a woman's defense of an outcast boy. A missing five dollar bill is the cause of all the trouble.

By VALENA MINOR WILLIAMS



"I just know that we are going to be good friends. I know you didn't take it"

The murmur from the three tables of women playing bridge in the living room followed Ann Ames as she stepped into the kitchen for fresh ice cubes.

Things were going well, she thought. This was her first time entertaining the neighborhood club and she had the satisfaction of knowing the women were impressed. She wondered why new brides were always so eager to please the established wives in a community.

A tinkling noise outside caused Ann to glance quickly out of the large window over the sink. What in the world was the little Rodgers boy doing out there? What would the women say if they knew he was there? They'd think she liked for him to play in her yard—and they wouldn't approve of that.

After all, his mother—well . . . little Terry didn't have a father. There was a sort of neighborhood ban on Terry. She caught on to that days after she and Jim had moved onto the street.

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SHE RAPPED on the glass and, with her lips pressed into a firm line that didn't go with the rest of her fresh young face, shook a reproving finger at the youngster. He really had no right to be rummaging through the trash barrels like that, but she felt guilty running him away.

At the sound of her warning Terry made a hasty retreat and Ann returned to the living room with the ice bucket filled.

"What was the noise in the kitchen?" Sue Jameson asked with a carefully raised eyebrow. Sue was the "big wheel" in the club and tried almost too successfully to run everyone's affairs.

"Just shooing away one of the youngsters from some broken glass in the back," Ann said pleasantly. "Fresh ice, ladies?"

She was filling Sue's glass when the doorbell rang.

"Oh, the laundry," Ann explained. "Excuse me, won't you? Jim's laundry is supposed to come this afternoon. Nice of them to wait until I was dummy." Ann went to the mantlepiece for her purse and took out a bill, a five dollar bill.

It wasn't the laundry. It was Terry.

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"WHAT DO you want?" Ann asked crisply, feeling the stares of the women behind her.

The complete candor of the seven-year-old's upturned face unnerved her. "I could tell that you were having the club here today." He fingered the skull cap he had doffed politely. "I was wondering if you had any bottles from the party that I might be able to sell to the junk yard?"

Ann was silent. She put the things down that she held and nervously wiped her hands on her brief party apron.

"I'm trying to get enough money together so that I can buy a wagon to haul groceries from the super market," Terry said hopefully. "Maybe you'll be one of my regular customers, Mrs. Ames."

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ANN COULD hear the buzz of the women behind her but she turned toward the kitchen. "Just a minute, Terry. I do have a few bottles. You're welcome to them."

WHEN ANN hurried back to Terry, he had moved out of the sight of the women and was watching her parakeet. She was relieved. He took the bottles from her with a bright smile and thanked her nicely.

Ann closed the door behind him and knew when she faced the women in the next room they would be ready to attack a conversational prey they all liked to pursue avidly.

"Imagine his prowling around the neighborhood by himself while his mother is off to Heaven knows where!" one voice led off.

"She's working, I understand, as a secretary downtown," Ann offered.

"I am glad she's not my Tom's secretary!" another barb flew.

"But the idea of leaving a seven-year-old child by himself! That's terrible!" another chimed in.

"It's no more than lots of women do when they are off playing bridge or going shopping." Ann knew she shouldn't have said that. She could see the coldness on their faces.

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IT WASN'T until the laundry finally did come that Ann discovered the five dollars was missing. The last rubber was just ending and the women were getting their wraps.

"I've got a good idea where that five dollars is," Sue purred, "but I certainly wouldn't suggest it to you."

"You mean you think . . .?"

"Why surely, I think Terry took it. You set these things down right there by the door when you went to get the bottles. We couldn't see him from in here. I tried to. You had a thief in your house, dearie!"

"He was watching the bird, that's all, I know it."

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IT WAS then that they saw Terry go by — and he was pulling a wagon. Not a bright red wagon, but a wagon just the same, all of its dinginess and obvious past history.

He started to walk past and then he came back and turned in at Ann's house. The women were beginning to leave, calling goodbyes and superficial pleasantries over their shoulders. None of them spoke to the happy little boy.

"I just had to show you my new wagon, Mrs. Ames. You were so nice to me," he said. His eyes were shining the way a child's should shine on Christmas morning. Ann's heart went out to him.

"Where did you get the money for that wagon so quickly?" Sue asked harshly.

"You go on, Sue," Ann suggested gently. "I'll talk to Terry."

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THE LAST of the women were gone and Ann beckoned the boy inside. His eyes had darkened in hurt and bewilderment.

"Terry, where did you get the money for your wagon?"

He hung his head as though he couldn't bear to look at her. Ann's heart sank. Perhaps he had taken the money.

"Terry, I lost some money this afternoon. All those women that were here would like me to think you took it. They will push to have me call the juvenile bureau if you don't tell me where you got the money."

Tears welled up in the boy's eyes. "If I tell, they got me. If I don't tell, they got me anyway," he said bitterly.

WAS HE going to say he took it? Ann shook her head. "You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to, Terry."

"I want to tell you. I can trust you." He stood back from her. "I saved the money, Mrs. Ames, I've been saving it for a long time from the money Mama gave me for show fare. And since that other lady called the juvenile bureau about my fixing my own lunch, Mama has been giving me money to eat at school.

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HE DREW himself up imperceptibly. "I'm the man in our family, Mrs. Ames, and I want to help Mama. She's working so hard that we might be able to stay together.

"Maybe this way with the wagon I can earn a little money — and stay busy in a way that the welfare folks won't always be bothering us."

"You dear child!" Ann said as she gathered him back into her arms. "You dear, wonderful boy! Over his head she looked mistily at first, and then her eyes jumped sharply into focus on the telephone pad.

The five dollar bill. There it was! She must have put it under the pad when she answered Jim's phone call earlier.

She reached for the money and the boy's eyes brightened as he realized that she had really found the missing money.

"Your mother won't mind, Terry, if just this once you have an early dinner with me, will she?"

There had been a thief in her house today, all right, Ann thought. But it certainly had not been Terry. She wondered when the rest of Sue's little clique would see Sue in her true light.



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HERE I STAND

Robeson Wanted To Go To Lincoln [Pa.] University

At 17, he had no thought of becoming an actor.

When he ranked first in the country-wide college entrance examinations, he knew two things:

1. He was going to Rutgers University on a scholarship.

2. Equality might be denied him later in life, but he knew he was not inferior.

Part Four

(Of a series of five articles from "Here I Stand," by Paul Robeson, published by Othello Associates, Inc., N.Y. Copyright 1958 by Paul Robeson. All rights reserved.)



FAMILY REUNION—Paul Robeson poses with members of the family after a concert in New York in 1948. Left to right, front: Miss Pauline Forsythe and Mrs. Bruce Liggins, nieces; Mrs. Ben Robeson, sister-in-law; Mr. Robeson, Mrs. Vivian Reynolds and Mrs. Berneita Smth, nieces; rear: Dr. Bruce Liggins, Lydia T. Brown, cousin; Mrs. William Forsythe, sister; Rev. Ben Robeson, brother; Mrs. Leila Perry, and Dr. William Forsythe, brother-in-law

Of lasting value during these formative years was the devoted help of my brothers and sister in the periods when they were at home.

There was Bill, the oldest, to whom the other children of Rev. Robeson gave first place so far as "brains" were concerned.

Though I have met many other brilliant persons in the years since then, time has not lessened the marveling regard I had for Bill's mental powers. Like Reed, he is dead; and his potential was never fulfilled.

He seemed always to be going to school — at Lincoln and Penn, in Boston and at Howard — except for interludes when his money was exhausted and he went to work at such jobs as were open to colored.

At various times he got work "running on the road" as a Pullman porter, and for a while he was a red-cap at Grand Central Station in New York where his fellows, impressed by his wide-ranging erudition, bestowed on him the nickname "Deep Stuff."

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MORE FORMAL recognition of his scholarship came to Bill: his field was medicine and he earned his degree.

But by temperament Bill was not meant to be a practicing physician.

I'm sure that if faced with the workaday task of setting a broken bone, Bill's mind would be concentrating on Lord knows what.

(Maybe on the history of bone-setting going back to the ancient Egyptians, or wondering about the molecular structure of bones in general — or, more likely, grappling with some problem of medical theory not even remotely related to the job at hand.)

Bill should have found a place in some scientific laboratory where his restless, searching mind might have been applied to the finding of deep-hidden answers.

(With someone else around to see to it that some test tubes were at hand and to jot down a finding before Bill forgot about it in his zest for discovering something else.)

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THOUGH HIS gift for theory and analysis had such little practical effect on his own life, for me Bill was the principal source of learning how to study.

During my high school years in Somerville, Bill was often at home, between colleges and railroad runs, and he spent much time directing my studies.

He was never satisfied when I came up with a correct answer. "Yes, but **WHY?**" he would insist sharply. What was the relation of one fact to another? What was the system, the framework, of a given study?

When I couldn't explain, Bill would quickly and clearly demonstrate the mystery to me; and to my constant amazement he could do that, after a very short inquiry, even in subjects he himself had not previously studied.

Often nowadays, when I am struggling with some difficult question in language or music study, trying to "break down" the particular system involved, I think of this brother and tutor and say to myself: "I'll bet if Bill were here he'd lick this problem in no time!"

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IT WAS my brother Ben who most inspired my interest in sports. Ben was an outstanding athlete by any standards, and had he attended one of the prominent colleges I'm convinced he would have been chosen All-American.

Certainly he ranked in ability with many of the famous stars I later encountered in college games and professional football.

Ben was also a remarkable baseball player, fleet of foot and a power at bat; and had colored then been permitted to play in the major leagues, I think that Ben was one of those who could have made the grade.

Closer to me in age than my other brothers, Ben was my favorite. It was he who first took me out into the world beyond our small-town life.

When I was about fourteen, and in high school, Ben got a job for the summer as a waiter at Narragansett Pier, in Rhode Island, where many colored students found vacation-time employment in the resorts of the rich.

I went along with Ben, to serve as kitchen boy.

My work — and I'm sure I have never again in all my life worked quite so hard — began at 4:00 a.m. and it was late evening before I emerged from the mountains of pots I scraped and scrubbed, the potatoes I peeled, the endless tasks ordered by the chef, the second cooks and helpers, all of whom outranked the kitchen boy and who were finished long before he had mopped up for the last time and put everything away in gleaming splendor.

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BUT ALWAYS there was the comforting presence of Brother Ben, around somewhere, keeping a watchful eye out for the kid brother in the kitchen who was bewildered by the rush and clatter of his first job, innocent among the other, more worldly-wise, workers.

Later in college days, I would go back again to Narragansett, and there, among the waiters, bus-boys and kitchen help, I made many friendships which last until today.

From among these student workers came many of the leading colored professionals whom I meet around the country today.

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MY SISTER Marion was not at home as much as Ben, but the thought of Sis always brings an inner smile.

She lives now in Philadelphia, with her husband, Dr. William Forsythe.

If it turned out that it was to be Ben who followed my father's calling as a minister, it was Marion who continued the teaching traditions of my mother's family.

As a girl she brought to our household the blessing of laughter, so filled is she with warm good humor.

When she was at home from school, Sis did the cooking, but firmly believing that a woman's place was not in anybody's kitchen—at least not for long — she always left the big stack of dishes . . . for me! (We laugh about that, too, when we get together.)

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WITH ALL her happy ways, Marion was earnestly resolved to stand on her own feet and make a way for herself, aware, more keenly than the rest of us, of the double burden that a colored woman bears in striving for dignity and fulfillment in our boasted "way of life."

As a young woman she became a school teacher in Philadelphia and remained in that vocation until recently.

I recall with pride her dedication to work with so-called backward children, and, her zeal to prove that devoted attention and care can bring these along with all others.

Marion and Ben — the two of them so much like my father in temperament. Reserved of speech, strong in character, living up to their principles — and always selflessly devoted to their youngest brother who cannot express in words his gratitude for their love. But in his heart there is a song, the most tender of songs — for them!

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WHEN I was seventeen and in my final semester at high school, I still had no vocation in mind. Singer? No, that was just for fun. Dramatics? Not I!

There was the lingering thought, never too definite, of studying for the ministry; and though my father would have liked that choice, he never pressed it upon me.

Perhaps in college I'd come to a decision about a career. The choice of a college had long been settled — Lincoln University of which Pop and Bill were alumni.

Soon after the scholarship examination, in the spring of 1915, I took part in a state-wide oratorical contest of high school students that was held at Rutgers.

Prize debater at Somerville High, diligent student of my father's artistry of speech, I shared the high hopes of my family and classmates that I might win first place.

I didn't.

First prize was won by Hilmar Jensen, a colored student from Asbury Park (his father, too, was a minister); second place went to a white girl; and I was third.

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THE SPEECH I declaimed on that occasion was Wendell Phillips' Famous oration on

(Continued on Page 8)

He Got The Scholarship

But then, in my senior year at Somerville High, I learned about a competitive examination open to all students in New Jersey; the prize — a four-year scholarship to Rutgers College.

Now a state university with an enrollment of over 7,000, Rutgers was then a private school with fewer than a thousand students. I knew about the college for it was only fifteen miles away, in New Brunswick.

One of the oldest colleges in America (founded in 1766), it was considered rather exclusive; and while one or two colored had once been admitted, none had attended Rutgers for many years.

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POP SAID I should take the examination, which for our county would be held in the Somerville Courthouse.

Lincoln was our preference, but if I managed to win this scholarship the financial strain on my father's modest income would be eased.

There was one big hitch: I should have taken a preliminary test the previous year, covering the subjects studied in the first three years of high school.

Somehow I had not known about it then, and so now I was faced with an examination, embracing the entire four-year course, in the same three-hour period during which the other competitors would cover only their senior year's work.

Still, even with this handicap, we decided the prize was worth trying for, and I set to work getting ready for the big day. The extra hurdle called for extraordinary effort, and I studied hard until late at night.

The good wishes of classmates and teachers and the ill-will of Dr. Ackerman, the principal, were spurs; and, most of all, Pop's quiet confidence had to be justified.

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WELL, I won the scholarship —and here was a decisive point in my life. That I would go to Rutgers was the least of it, for I was sure I'd be happier at Lincoln.

The important thing was this: **Deep in my heart from that day on was a conviction which none of the Ackermans of America would ever be able to shake.** Equality might be denied, but I **knew** I was not inferior.

At the New York opening of Shakespeare's Othello, Paul Robeson, as star, received one of the most prolonged and wildest ovations in the history of the New York theatre.—Life Magazine, August 31, 1942.