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John Boyle O'Reilly

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John Boyle O'Reilly

CRISPUS ATTACKS

~
Negro Patriot—Killed In Boston, March 5, 1770
~

Read at the Dedication of the Crispus Attacks Monument
In Boston, November 14, 1888
~

WHERE shall we seek for a hero, and where shall we find a story?
Our laurels are wreathed for conquest, our songs for completed glory.
But we honor a shrine unfinished, a column uncapped with pride,
If we sing the deed that was sown like seed when Crispus Attacks died.
Shall we take for a sign this Negro-slave with unfamiliar name—
With his poor companions, nameless too, till their lives leaped forth in flame!
Yea, surely, the verdict is not for us to render or deny;
We can only interpret the symbol; God chose these men to die—
As teachers and types, that to humble lives may chief award be made;
That from lowly ones, and rejected stones, the temple's base is laid!

When the bullets leaped from the British guns, no chance decreed their aim;
Men see what the royal hirelings saw—a multitude and a flame;
But beyond the flame, a mystery; five dying men in the street,
While the streams of severed races in the well of a nation meet!

The Boston Massacre, March 5, 1770, may be regarded as the first act in the drama of the American Revolution. "From that moment" said Daniel Webster, "we may date the severance of the British Empire." The presence of the British soldiers in King Street excited the patriotic indignation of the people. . . . Led by Crispus Attacks, the mulatto slave, and shouting, "The way to get rid of these soldiers is to attack the main guard; strike at the root; this is the nest," with more valor than discretion, they rushed to King Street, and were fired upon by Captain Preston's company. Crispus Attacks was the first to fall; he and Samuel Gray and Jonas Caldwell were killed on the spot. Samuel Maverick and Patrick Carr were mortally wounded.—Historical Research by George Livermore, Massachusetts Historical Society.

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O, blood of the people! changeless tide, through century, creed and race!
Still one as the sweet salt sea is one, though tempered by sun and place;
The same in the ocean currents, and the same in the sheltered seas;
Forever the fountain of common hopes and kindly sympathies;
Indian and Negro, Saxon and Celt Teuton and Latin and Gaul—
Mere surface shadow and sunshine; while the sounding unifies all!
One love, one hope, one duty theirs! No matter the time or ken,
There never was separate heart beat in all the races of men!
But alien is one—of class not race he has drawn the line for himself,
His roots drink life from inhumane soil from garbage of pomp and pelf;
His heart beats not with the common beat, he has changed his life-stream's hue;
He deems his flesh to be finer flesh, he boasts that his blood is blue:
Patrician, aristocrat, tory—whatever his age or name,
To the people's rights and liberties, a traitor ever the same.
The natural crowd is a mob to him, their prayer a vulgar rhyme;
The freeman's speech is sedition, and the patriot's deed a crime.
Wherever the race, the law, the land,—whatever the time, or throne,
The tory is always a traitor to every class but his own.

Thank God for a land where pride is clipped, where arrogance stalks apart;
Where law and song loathing of wrong are words of the common heart;
Where the masses honor straightforward strength, and know, when veins are
bled,
That the bluest blood is putrid blood—that the people's blood is red!

And honor to Crispus Attucks, who was leader and voice that day;
The first to defy, and the first to die, with Maverick, Carr, and Gray.
Call it riot or revolution, his hand first clenched at the crown;
His feet were the first in perilous place to pull the king's flag down;
His breast was the first one rent apart that liberty's stream might flow;
For our freedom now and forever, his head was the first laid low.

Call it riot or revolution or mob or crowd as you may,
Such deaths have been seed of nations such lives shall be honored for aye.
They were lawless hinds to the lackeys—but martyrs to Paul Revere;
And Otis and Hancock and Warren read spirit and meaning clear.
Ye teachers, answer: what shall be done when just men stand in the dock;
When the caitiff is robed in ermine, and his sword keeps the lock;
When torture is robbed of clemency, and guilt is without remorse;
When tiger and panther are gentler than the Christian slaver's curse;
When law is a satrap's menace, and order the drill of a horde
Shall the people kneel to be trampled, and bare their neck to the sword!

Not so! by this Stone of Resistance that Boston raises here!
 By the old North Church's lantern, and the watching of Paul Revere;
 Not so! by Paris of 'Ninety Three and Ulster of 'Ninety Eight!
 By Toussaint in St. Domingo! by the horror of Delhi's gate!
 By Adams's word to Hutchinson! by the tea that is brewing still;
 By the farmers that met the soldiers at Concord and Bunker Hill!

Not so! not so! Till the world is done; the shadow of wrong is dread;
 The crowd that bends to a lord to day, to-morrow shall strike him dead.

There is only one thing changeless: the earth steals from under our feet,
 The times and manners are passing moods, and the laws are incomplete;
 There is only one thing changes not, one word that still survives—
 The slave is the wretch who wields the lash, and not the man in gyves!

There is only one test of contract: is it willing, is it good?
 There is only one guard of equal right: the unity of blood;
 There is never a mind unchained and true that class or race allows;
 There is never a law to be obeyed that reason disavows;
 There is never a legal sin but grows to the law's disaster,
 There master shall drop the whip, and the slave shall enslave the master!

O, Planter of seed in thought and deed has the year of right revolved,
 And brought the Negro patriot's cause with its problem to be solved?
 His blood streamed first for the building, and through all the century's years,
 Our growth of story and fame of glory are mixed with his blood and tears.
 He lived with men like a soul condemned—derided, defamed, and mute;
 Debased to the brutal level, and instructed to be a brute.
 His virtue was shorn of benefit, his industry of reward;
 His love! —O men, it were mercy to have out affection's cord;
 Through the night of his woe, no pity save that of his fellow-slave;
 For the wage of his priceless labor, the scourging block and the grave!

And now, is the tree to blossom? Is the bowl of agony filled?
 Shall the price be paid and the honor said, and the word of outrage stilled?
 And we who have toiled for freedom's law, have we sought for freedom's soul?
 Have we learned at last that human right is not a part but the whole?
 That nothing is told while the clinging sin remains part unconfessed?
 That the health of the nation is periled if one man be oppressed?

Has he learned—the slave from the rice swamps, whose children were sold—
has he

With broken chains on his limbs, and the cry in his blood, “I am free!”
Has he learned through affliction’s teaching what our Crispus Attucks knew—
When Right is stricken, the white and black are counted as one, not two?
Has he learned that his century of grief was worth a thousand years
In blending his life and blood with ours, and that all his toils and tears
Were heaped and poured on him suddenly, to give him a right to stand
From the gloom of African forests in the blaze of the freest land?
That this hundred years have earned for him a place in the human van
Which others have fought for and thought for since the world of wrong began?

For this, shall his vengeance change to love, and his retribution burn,
Defending the right, the weak and the poor, when each shall have his turn;
For this, shall he set his woeful past afloat on the stream of night;
For this, he forgets as we all forget when darkness turns to light;
For this, he forgives as we all forgive when wrong has changed to right.

And so, must we come to the learning of Boston’s lesson to-day;
The moral that Crispus Attucks taught in the old heroic way;
God made mankind to be one in blood, as one in spirit and thought;
And so great a boon, by a brave man’s death, is never dearly bought!

