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Archibald H. Grimké

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Her Thirteen Black Soldiers

Archibald H. Grimké

This poem was first published in 1919 in The Messenger, a monthly magazine founded and coedited by black labor leader A. Philip Randolph.

She hanged them, her thirteen black soldiers,
She hanged them for mutiny and murder,
She hanged then after she had put on them her uniform,
After she had put on them her uniform, the uniform of her soldiers,
She told them they were to be brave, to fight and. If needs be to die
for her.

This was many years before she hanged them, her thirteen black
soldiers.

She told them to go there and they went,
To come here and they came, her brave black soldiers.
For her they went without food and water,
For her they suffered cold and heat,
For her they marched by day,
For her they watched by night,

For her in strange lands they stood fearless,
For her in strange lands they watched shelterless,
For her in strange lands they fought,
For her in strange lands they bled,
For her they faced fevers and fierce men,
For her they were always and everywhere ready to die.
And now she has hanged them, her thirteen black soldiers.
For murder and mutiny she hanged them in anger and hate,
Hanged them in secret and dark and disgrace,
In secret and dark buried them and left them in nameless disgrace.
Why did she hang them, her thirteen black soldiers,
They had served her, her faithful black soldiers,
They had served her without flinching,
They had served her in peril, in fever, with wounds.
For her at her bidding they marched ready to die,
For her they gave their bodies to wind and rain and cold,
For her they marched without turning or tiring to face her enemies,
For her they charged them and their cannon,
For her they leaped over danger and breastworks,
For her clutched out of defeat, victory,
For her they laid their all at her feet, her thirteen black soldiers.

But she hanged them in anger and hate,

And buried them in nameless disgrace.

Yes, why did she hang them, her thirteen black soldiers?

What had they done to merit such fate?

She sent them to Houston, to Houston, in Texas,

She sent them in her uniform to this Southern city,

She sent them her soldiers, her thirteen brave soldiers.

They went at her bidding to Houston,

They went where they were ordered.

They could not choose another place,

For they were soldiers and went where they were ordered.

They marched into Houston not knowing what awaited them.

Insult awaited them and violence.

Insult and violence hissed at them from house windows and struck at

them in the streets.

American colorphobia hissed and struck at them as they passed by on

the streets

In street cars they met discrimination and insult,

“they are not soldiers, they and their uniforms,

They are but common niggers,

They must be treated like common niggers,

They and their uniform.”

So hissed colorphobia, indigenous to Texas.

And then it squirted its vernom on them and on her uniform. In their
black faces the venom splashed,

Into their brave heads colorphobia sunk its fangs,

And covered with foul slime her uniform,

The uniform of thirteen black soldiers.

And what did she do, she who put that uniform on them,

And bade them to do and die if needs be for her?

Did she raise an arm to protect them?

Did she raise her voice to frighten away the reptilian thing?

Did she lift a finger or say a word of rebuke at it?

Did she do anything in defense of her black soldiers?

She did nothing. She sat complacent, indifferent in her seat of power. She
had eyes but she refused to see what Houston was doing to her

black soldiers,

She had ears but she stuffed them with cotton,

That she might not hear the murmured rage of her black soldiers.

They suffered alone, they were defenseless against insult and

violence,

For she would not see them nor hear them nor protect them.

Then in desperation they smote the reptilian thing,
They smote it as they had smitten before her enemies,
For was it not her enemy, the reptilian thing, as well as their own?
They in an hour of madness smote it in battle furiously,
And it shrank back from their blows hysterical,
Terror and fear of death seized it, and it cried unto her for help.
And she, who would not hear black soldiers in their dire need,
She, who put her uniform on them, heard their enemy.
She flew at its call and hanged her brave black soldiers.

She hanged them for doing for themselves what she ought to have
done for them.

She hanged them for resenting insult to her uniform,
She hanged them for defending from violence her brave black
soldiers.

Loyal to the last were they and obedient.

“Attention!” she said to them, her thirteen black soldiers,
And without fear or bravado they marched at her bidding, singing
their death song,

They marched with the dignity of brave men to the gallows,

With the souls of warriors they marched without a whimper to their
doom.

And so they were hanged, her thirteen black soldiers.

And so they lie buried in nameless disgrace.