

Eighth Regiment Characters.

III.

Reverdy C. Ransom.

"Martin Luther's tack hammer is still sounding round the world."

That was a dramatic statement uttered on Thanksgiving Day, 1897, by a slender, light-brown skinned clergyman, yet in his early thirties. It was from the pulpit of old historical Bethel A.M.E. Church in Chicago.

That clergyman was Reverdy C. Ransom, Ohioan by birth and a graduate of Wilberforce University. His Thanksgiving sermon was printed in pamphlet form and distributed among the Negro citizens of Chicago.

Ransom was Bishop Benjamin Arnett's choice for the pastorate of Bethel. Arnett was an Ohioan and a stalwart backer of William McKinley for the Presidency of the United States. He saw in young Ransom a clear thinker who would go far in the world of action.

When Ransom assumed charge of Bethel in 1897 he immediately proved himself to be a dynamo, especially in civic leadership. One of his first acts was to organize the Bethel Sunday Club, as he stated from the pulpit "to afford a Sunday forum for the young people that they should not be forced to spend the Sabbath on the streets and in disreputable places and to enable the best minds of both races to commune with them."

Ransom's Sunday Club packed the church every Sunday afternoon. I remember . . . I was merely a child . . . hearing at that Sunday Club such speakers as Booker T. Washington, Judge Gibbons, Supt. of Public

Instruction Benjamin Andrews of Chicago, Jenkin Lloyd Jones, and others. S. Laing Williams, a prominent colored lawyer, was President of the Club.

I have no doubt but that Chicago's Sunday Evening Club, famous for over a quarter of a century, is an outgrowth of Ransom's Sunday Club idea.

But what caused Ransom to be a sensation in his day was that he was the first colored clergyman in Chicago to render the race problem the body of his sermons. He burned with indignation over racial wrongs and at the same time he cultivated the habit of constructive advice.

Once I heard him say:

"The young man of our race must demand what he wants. He must not be afraid to knock at the door of opportunity and if no one should open the door for him he must open it himself."

The Ransom sermons became so outstanding that the Chicago Inter-Ocean reported them verbatim each Monday morning. In time Ransom was looked upon as the spokesman for Chicago's colored population.

Consequently it was not so surprising to hear Ransom utter from his pulpit one Sunday morning during the Spring of 1898:

"Your pastor has been very busy during the past week. I am anxious that the Ninth Battalion should be mustered into the service as a complete regiment with all of the officers colored. Major Marshall and I were at Springfield a few days ago and we held a conference with Gov. Tanner. The Governor assures us that he will do all he can to have the Ninth Battalion created into a regiment."

That, so far as I know, was the first public announcement of the

possibility of the Ninth Battalion becoming the Eighth Illinois Regiment.

Apparently it was Ransom's idea and, in his dynamic fashion, he put it into execution. It was not long and the new regiment was born and on its way to camp . . . the first regiment in America to be commanded entirely by colored officers.

Ransom received no position or honors in the regiment. There was a squabble over the Chaplaincy. . . the lovable Rev. John F. Thomas who had been the battalion's Chaplain was superseded by a son of Bishop Arnett and finally the post went to Dr. J. Chavis. It was simply a Ransom idea, this regiment, and he was satisfied at seeing it put into execution.

In 1900 Ransom had another idea. This time he took it to the bishops of the A.M.E. Church and the result was the founding of the Institutional A.M.E. Church in Chicago, the first Negro social settlement church in America.

Ransom was installed as pastor and immediately began trying to shape the church as a race problem institution. One of the projects of the church was called the Choral Study Club, an organization of singers directed by Pedro T. Tinsley. The specialty of this club was the study and rendition of Coleridge-Taylor's music and many of the works of the great composer this society had the honor of introducing to America for the first time.

Another of the significant projects of this church, under the Ransom pastorate, was the Chicago City Conference. The Atlanta Conference was the model for this Conference and Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois, com-

paratively obscure, ("The Souls of Black Folk" had not been published) was brought from Atlanta to conduct it. It lasted two or three weeks and the discussions were largely along sociological and economic lines.

Ransom's initiative as a preacher interested in the race problem won him the dislike of other Chicago Negro clergymen and also of a large number of the colored conservative church laymen. During the declining years of his Chicago residence his Chicago popularity dwindled.

I remember that as a high school youth I went to him to help me in a debate wherein I was pitted against Jerome Frank, the present Chairman of S. E. C. Ransom expressed interest but as the subject concerned the church and taxation and my argument was to be in favor of "taxing churches" he was unable to help me.

"Naturally" he said, "I've always thought along the line of the other side of the subject. But I certainly hope, for the good of the race, you win the debate."

Ransom was transferred to Bethel A.M.E. Church in New York City and Institutional became over night an ordinary church. And then Chicago began to realize the greatness of the man who had lived in its midst.

In the East Ransom renewed his leadership as a racial spokesman and organizer.

Several years later he visited Chicago and at a meeting at Bethel Church he announced that the N.A.A.C.P. was in process of organization and that it was hoped Dr. Du Bois would be active with the organization.



And then came 1912.

Theodore Roosevelt was running against William H. Taft for the Republican nomination for the Presidency. Ransom, at Bethel Church in Chicago, introduced Roosevelt to a packed house of colored Teddy die-hards -- the thousands outside couldn't hear him, though they waited patiently for a glimpse of the Colonel -- with these vain but ringing words,

"I present you the next President of the United States."

Ransom, however, never became a Bull-Mooser.

The first month I was in New York I met Ransom more definitely. He asked me about certain prominent members of my family . . .

Shortly after that I sent him . . . he was Editor of the A.M.E. Review . . . a short-story Dr. Du Bois rejected for The Crisis, claiming that due to criticism The Crisis did not dare to publish pessimistic stories. Ransom's response was:

"I am only too glad to publish a story like that."

Once, a few years later, I contributed to his magazine a group of free verse selections from my "African Nights" series.

In 1921 I saw Ransom often. Once it was deemed necessary for my movement to obtain his active co-operation. I made two trips to Orange, N. J., where he lived, and on the second occasion gave my message to his wife.

A few days later I met him on one of the streets in Harlem. We shook hands and he said:

"You ask me to do more than I am capable of doing. But I certainly

rejoice that there is one young man God would inspire to work for our race."

The years rolled on and finally Ransom was elected a bishop in the A.M.E. Church.

And then he returned to the scene of his youth, Wilberforce, O., where he could walk on the campus of Wilberforce University and be with the youth of the race he loved so well.

A few weeks ago Bishop Ransom stood on the rostrum at the Chicago Stadium and offered invocation before the Democratic National Convention on the eve of the nomination of a second Roosevelt.