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# An Unforgettable Character

By Andrew Peeples

Illustrated by Jeff Persse

Everyone has an unforgettable character tucked away in his memory. Mine was an old Negro man named Dolphus Blake. He couldn't read or write, but from him I learned more about some of the important things of life than from all of my college professors put together.

Of course the things I learned from old Dolphus were not things one learns from textbooks. They were the intangibles that make a man what he is, things like patience, moderation, loyalty—things one never inherits or buys, but obtains simply by practicing them.

I said that Dolphus couldn't read or write. I hasten to amend that. With a great deal of effort he could write his name, which he learned to do after he was a grown man. "Nobody," he said, "didn't had no 'scuse not to know he own name

when he see 'em." The name he knew, however, was not Dolphus Blake, it was Edward Blake. Proudly he explained that his parents named him Edward. "Other people," he said, "tack Dolphus on me when I a boy."

Dolphus had the true pride of an intelligent Gullah Negro. He looked with contempt upon bad-mannered people, young or old, white or colored. To him there were only two strata in human society. One was made up of people who were kind and considerate of their fellowmen. The other included everybody else, and Dolphus referred to then as "de common run of white and colored folks."

Dolphus Blake was born on Bull's Island and lived there and on the nearby islands of Barataria and Hilton Head before he moved to

Bluffton. He married a Hilton Head girl whom he called Blossom and they had two sons, both of whom were grown when I knew Dolphus.

A fisherman by nature and by necessity, Dolphus owned a homemade bateau.<sup>1</sup> It leaked copiously and constant bailing was required to keep it afloat, and it couldn't have been heavier if it had been built out of lead. But some of the most distinguished citizens of Atlanta, Savannah, Charleston, Columbia and other Georgia and South Carolina cities often endured and enjoyed a full day of fishing or hunting with Dolphus Blake in his clumsy craft.

Dolphus was a commercial fisherman. His bateau with himself at the oars was for hire to anybody who wanted to fish or shoot ducks and marsh hens. His flexible fee was always "any ting you wanna gimme." If he was grossly underpaid, as he often was by "de common run of white folks," Dolphus remembered his face and voice, and the next time he called on Dolphus to take him in the river, Dolphus was "sick."

When Dolphus took a liking to someone, as he did to me, there was no fee for his services. "Some folks," he said, "is good fuh money an' some is good for comp'ny. You come under de headin' of comp'ny." I was honored to be considered a kindred spirit to a proud man like Dolphus Blake.

For many wonderful years old Dolphus and I were often together, fishing, shooting ducks and marsh hens, and, best of all, just sitting in his boat talking quietly.

But it wasn't altogether through the medium of talking that Dolphus was my teacher. In Truth, he never knew or suspected that he was teaching me anything, except how to catch a fish or find a hiding marsh hen. I learned by observing and imitating the things in him I admired so much.

No man on earth knew any better than Dolphus that "time and tide wait for no man." Often his heavy bateau would be left high and dry and he would have to drag and push it through sand and mud and marsh grass before

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<sup>1</sup> The lowcountry *bateau* had a flat bottom with a shallow keel. The boats were often heavy and it took a strong person to row one very far. The word *bateau* comes, of course, from the French word for *boat*.

we could float it. When I complained that we were going to be too late to fish if we didn't hurry and get the 'd— old boat" in the water, Dolphus would stop dead in his tracks, straighten up to his full six feet, look me straight in the eye and say, "Cap, you young, an' you gots to learn hurry ain' get you nowhere cep de grave."

Once on a fishing trip Dolphus caught six bass before I hooked one. "I don't understand it," I grumbled. "We're using the same bait and the same kind of rig."

"Yeah, Cap," said Dolphus, us using de same bait, an' de same rig, but us ain't usin' de same patience. You so hurry you jerk de hook out de fish mout'."

I caught the next strike.

It took me a long time to begin to learn what Dolphus knew about patience. I say begin, because I know that I shall have to keep on learning patience as long as I live. But through the years I have made a conscious practice, and I know that I have at least learned that "hurry ain' go get you nowhere cep de grave."

In the days that I knew Dolphus, I had a zest for life that made me overdo a lot of things. I had to learn to work and play with moderation. In Dolphus Blake I found the very personification of that word.

Dolphus was one of the healthiest men I've ever known. His endurance was incredible. But he never let his strength run away with him. He knew when to rest, and especially when to say, "No thank you, I got 'nough." By always staying on an even keel himself, my mentor taught me the folly of getting off balance.

As for what I learned about loyalty from Dolphus I can best explain it by relating a little incident in his life.

One day Dolphus and another colored man were hired to load a truck with cattle and haul them to Savannah. On the way, the truck was stopped and the two men were arrested and charged with stealing the cattle. They denied the charge, but refused to tell who hired them to load and haul the animals. They were locked up in a county jail and told they would remain there until they decided to talk.

A tape recorder was concealed in the cell with the two men. The next morning when it was

played back to them, Dolphus and his companion were shocked to hear their voices repeating the “private” conversation of the night before, with Dolphus naming the cattle thief, a white man well known in Bluffton.

But in his unintentional betrayal, Dolphus had also recorded his loyalty.

“Mr. M—— mighta steel dem cows,” his voice whispered from the speaker, “but a fine gentleman like him ain’ go lef’ us in no jail fuh rot, and I ain’t tellin’ nothin’ if I stay heah till Judgment Day.”

Yes, it was easy to learn about loyalty from a man who felt that way about his friends.

Dolphus had a deep reverence for God and nature. He believed that God wanted him to enjoy himself here on earth. But he also believed that the Almighty had put certain restrictions on man’s relations with other creatures.

One time I was tempted to shoot a buzzard that kept circling low over our boat. Dolphus was horrified. “Cap,” he said, “don’t you never kill one dem bird. God put ‘em on dis eart’ to do a special job, an’ a man ain’ spose to had nothin’ to do wid ‘em.”

“Well,” I said, “what’s he nosing into our business for?”

“Cap,” Dolphus said, “he ain’ nosin’ nothin’ but dem swimp up dey under the bow. I forget to take ‘em out de boat yestiddy an’ he done gone and an spile.”

Another time, when we were fishing near the ocean where sharks were plentiful, I decided to have a little excitement. Dolphus watched me put a small fish on my hook. “Cap,” he begged, “please, suh, don’ bring no sha’k in dis boat. I knowed a man did once, an’ he drown in a squall fore he get back home.”

I laughed and went ahead and caught my shark, a six-foot shovel-nose, and Dolphus swore that something terrible was going to happen.

And so it did. While we were crossing Calibogue Sound on our way home, a squall swooped down from nowhere with all the fury of a full-blown hurricane, tossing our boat around on mountainous waves like a matchbox in a laundry tub. Dolphus caught the shark by the tail and flung it overboard, and almost instantly the wind and rain ceased.

“See dey, Cap!” cried Dolphus. “Soon’s I give ‘em back to de water dem waves quiet right down! Don’t never bring no sha’k in no boat no mo’ long as us live!”

Never again did I fish for a shark with Dolphus in the boat. I caught a few when he wasn’t along. But I must confess, not without a bit of trepidation in my heart and a watchful eye skyward for the first sign of a squall cloud.

About two years before Dolphus Blake died, something happened in his family life that gave him a deep, long-lasting hurt. It was his secret pain, and until the very last he bore it alone.

At sight of me his eyes would still brighten as they had always done, but then he would lapse into an attitude of indifference toward all the things that once gave us so much pleasure together.

The last time I saw him, about two weeks before he died, we sat together on his upturned bateau and talked for a long time. He had been seriously ill in a hospital and seemed to know that his days were numbered. He said he would never be able to go fishing again. “But Cap,” he said, straightening up as best he could and looking me straight in the eye, “us had some good time together. Us meet again some day.”

We will, too.

Editor’s note: This story has been reprinted by permission from Andrew Peeples’ daughter, Mildred Peeples Pemberton. Andrew’s brother, the composer Luke Peeples, was also impressed with Dolphus. One of Luke’s best songs is entitled *Dolphus’ Lament*. Two volumes of the musical works of Luke Peeples are now available at local stores, at [astarfell.com](http://astarfell.com) and [thebookpatch.com](http://thebookpatch.com).