



INTRODUCTION

Little Rock, Arkansas, January 1920

The black prisoners on Death Row had accepted their fate. As they awaited execution, they sang songs about forgiving their enemies and meeting their Maker. They did not realize that Ida Wells-Barnett, the famous black reporter, had snuck into the jail to interview them. Now she was growing impatient. After listening to their sad songs, she rose from her seat and walked close to the bars.

“I have listened to your story,” she said. “You have talked and sung and prayed about dying. But why don’t you pray to live—and ask God to be freed? If you have all the faith you say you have, you ought to believe that He will open your prison doors.”

The men looked at each other in amazement. They knew Wells-Barnett was a reporter, but

was she also a miracle worker? She didn't look like one. She was tiny, barely five feet tall. Her hair was gray. Her face was careworn. Still, when they looked into her eyes, they saw a will of iron. For the first time since their troubles began, the men felt hopeful.

Ida spent two weeks in Arkansas interviewing people connected with what would come to be called the Arkansas Race Riot. Once back in her hometown of Chicago, she set to work writing a pamphlet about the case. In it, she told the true story of how the white planters had cheated the black farmers out of wages for the cotton they picked. When the black farmers had formed a union to fight for justice, the white planters had fought back. They had sent two armed men to break up the union meeting. In the scuffle that followed, one white man was killed. Afterward, armed bands of whites roamed through black neighborhoods, killing scores of innocent people. As the whites rampaged, they set fire to the blacks' property and stole whatever they could. When it was all over, five whites and between one hundred and two hundred blacks had been killed.

In the days that followed, none of the rioting whites had been put on trial. Instead, twelve black farmers were tried. While in

prison, they had been beaten and given electric shocks to get them to confess. They had all been “defended” by court-appointed local white attorneys. No jury had taken more than eight minutes to deliver guilty verdicts. They were all sentenced to death in the electric chair. It was a mockery of justice, and Ida would tell the world so.

“I truly believe,” she concluded, “when these facts are laid before the world, it will so open the eyes of the country . . . that the whole country will say, ‘Let those men go free!’”

The following winter, Ida was at home when she heard a knock on the door. When she opened it, a young man said, “Good evening, Mrs. Barnett. Do you know who I am?”

“I do not,” Ida replied.

“I am one of the twelve men that you came down to Arkansas about last year.”

When the rest of Ida’s family came in to be introduced, the young man said, “Mrs. Barnett told us to quit talking about dying, that if we really had faith in the God we worshipped, we ought to pray for him to open our prison doors. After that,” he said, “we never talked about dying any more, but did as she told us. Now every last one of us is out and enjoying his freedom.”

Ida was pleased that the young man had come all this way to thank her. Over the years, she had fought long and hard to achieve equality for her people. It was an exhausting struggle. There had been victories and defeats along the way. But whatever the outcome of her efforts, she always knew that she had given her best.

Why was Ida so determined to go to any lengths to win justice for her people? Why did she refuse to give up hope, even when others had? The answer lies in the example her parents, Jim and Lizzie Wells, set for her years earlier in a little town in northern Mississippi called Holly Springs.



CHAPTER 1

“**I**da, show us how well you can read,” said Jim Wells.

“Yes, Papa.”

Seven-year-old Ida was happy to obey her father. Quietly, she put down her dust rag, took the newspaper from her father’s hand, and began reading the day’s headline aloud.

“Governor Ames Visits Marshall County,” she read in a clear voice. Then she read the rest of the article.

Her father’s friends, Chester and Bill, smiled and nodded. However, they weren’t at all surprised. Why shouldn’t the oldest child of Jim and Lizzie Wells be smart as a whip? Jim was a skilled carpenter and a leader in the community of former slaves. He was what was then known as a “race man,” a black man who would go out of his way to help others of his race. When his

white employer, Spires Bolling, had told him how to vote in the recent elections, Jim had gone ahead and voted for the candidates he thought were best. At this time, the different political parties had differently shaped ballots, so it was easy to see how votes were cast. When Bolling saw how Jim had voted, he was not pleased.

The next day, when Jim came to work, he found that he had been locked out of the shop. Without a word to Bolling, Jim bought new tools and opened his own shop. The shop was a success. And it wasn't only Jim who had earned people's respect. Ida's mother, Lizzie, was known for miles around as a most wonderful cook and a strict but loving mother.

"You've got a smart daughter there, Jim," said Chester. "She'll go places. Maybe be a teacher." Bill nodded in agreement.

"Ida, would you like to be a teacher?" Ida's father asked her.

"Yes—well, maybe," Ida replied.

Although she hadn't told anyone yet, Ida thought that someday she might like to write for the newspaper she read. As it was now, when she wasn't doing chores, she often had her nose in a newspaper or book. It was something both parents encouraged. As a slave, Lizzie had been forbidden to learn to read. Jim

Wells had been a little luckier. His father was a white plantation owner who had no children by his white wife. Jim's mother, Peggy, was a slave woman. Realizing Jim's intelligence, his slave-owner father made sure his only child learned to read. When he was sixteen, he apprenticed Jim to a carpenter.

By the time the Civil War started, Jim had met and married Lizzie. Ida, born in 1862, was their first child. When she was six, they sent her to a school which had been founded by a white man, a former Union army captain by the name of Nelson Gill. For his efforts to aid newly freed slaves, Gill was hated by many of the local whites. Some of them had tried to kill him. His wife, Margaret, a teacher at the Freedman's school Ida attended, was determined to give the black children an education.

One day before school, several of Mrs. Gill's students came to her, saying that they had been called ugly names and been forced off the sidewalk by some white children. In these days, it was expected that black people would get off the sidewalk to allow white people to pass. If they didn't, they could be fined or even thrown in jail. However, Ida, like her father, was not one to take things lying down. She was one of the students who complained to Mrs. Gill.

“It’s so unfair,” one of the girls insisted. “We weren’t bothering them.”

“Yes,” Ida echoed. “It’s our sidewalk, too.”

Mrs. Gill listened to the girls. Then she came up with a plan. She would place herself in the center of a column of black girls who would lock arms to form a solid wall across the sidewalk. Would it work? They would see.

After school, Ida and her classmates linked arms with Mrs. Gill and walked down the tree-lined street. As they walked, they chatted merrily, as if it was the most natural thing in the world to walk arm-in-arm this way. Three white girls were approaching. They looked horrified when they saw who was walking toward them. They knew they would either have to come into direct contact with the black girls and their teacher or get out of their way. They got out of their way.

After a few days of this, the taunting and teasing stopped. Through this example, young Ida learned there could be strength in numbers. It was a lesson she never forgot.