



“Corn Songs in Harvest-time”

in Francis Fedric, *Slave Life in Virginia and Kentucky; or, Fifty Years of Slavery in the Southern States of America*

1863

Francis Fedric escaped from Kentucky to Canada and later traveled to England, where his autobiography was published during the Civil War. In this selection, Fedric describes the annual cornshuckings on southern plantations, emphasizing the call-and-response work songs that provided pace and communality during the long repetitive labor.



Twentieth-century corn shucking on the farm of an African American tenant farmer, North Carolina, ca. November 1939

... In the autumn, about the 1st of November, the slaves commence gathering the Indian-corn, pulling it off the stalk and throwing it into heaps. Then it is carted home and thrown into heaps sixty or seventy yards long, seven or eight feet high, and about six or seven feet wide. Some of the masters make their slaves shuck the corn. All the slaves stand on one side of the heap and throw the ears over, which are then cribbed. This is the time when the whole country far and wide resounds with the corn-songs. When they commence shucking the corn, the master will say, “Ain’t you going to sing any tonight?” The slaves say, “Yers, Sir.” One slave will begin:—

“Fare you well, Miss Lucy.

ALL. John come down de hollow.”

The next song will be:—

“Fare you well, fare you well.

ALL. Weell ho. Weell ho.

CAPTAIN. Fare you well, young ladies all.

ALL. Weell. ho. Weell ho.

CAPTAIN. Fare you well, I’m going away.

ALL. Weell ho. Weell ho.

CAPTAIN. I’m going away to Canada.

ALL. Weell ho. Weell ho.”

One night Mr. Taylor, a large planter, had a corn shucking, a Bee it is called. The corn pile was 180 yards long. He sent his slaves on horseback with letters to the other planters around to ask them to allow their slaves to come and help. On a Thursday night, about 8 o’clock, the slaves were heard coming, the corn-songs ringing through the plantations. “Oh, they are coming, they are coming!” exclaimed Mr. Taylor, who had been anxiously listening some time for the songs. The slaves marched up in companies, headed by captains who had in the crowns of their hats a short stick with feathers tied to it, like a cockade. I myself was in one of the companies. Mr. Taylor shook hands with each captain as the companies arrived, and said the men were to have some brandy if they wished, a large jug of which was ready for them.

Mr. Taylor ordered the corn-pile to be divided into two by a large pole laid across. Two men were chosen as captains, and the men, to the number of 300 or 400, were told off to each captain. One of the captains got Mr. Taylor on his side, who said he should not like his party to be beaten. "Don't throw the corn too far. Let some of it drop just over, and we'll shingle some and get done first. I can make my slaves shuck what we shingle tomorrow," said Mr. Taylor, "for I hate to be beaten."

The corn-songs now rang out merrily, all working willingly and gaily. Just before they had finished the heaps, Mr. Taylor went away into the house; then the slaves, on Mr. Taylor's side, by shingling, beat the other side; and his Captain and all his men rallied around the others and took their hats in their hands and cried out, "Oh, oh! fie! for shame!"

It was two o'clock in the morning now, and they marched to Mr. Taylor's house, the Captain hollowing out, "Oh, where's Mr. Taylor? Oh, where's Mr. Taylor?" all the men answering, "Oh, oh, oh!"

Mr. Taylor walked with all his family on the verandah; and the Captain sang,

"I've just come to let you know.	
MEN.	Oh, oh, oh!
CAPTAIN.	The upper end has beat.
MEN.	Oh, oh, oh!
CAPTAIN.	But isn't they sorry fellows?
MEN.	Oh, oh, oh!
CAPTAIN.	But isn't they sorry fellows?
MEN.	Oh, oh, oh!
CAPTAIN.	But I'm going back again,
MEN.	Oh, oh, oh!
CAPTAIN.	But I'm going back again.
MEN.	Oh, oh, oh!
CAPTAIN.	And where's Mr. Taylor?
MEN.	Oh, oh, oh!
CAPTAIN.	And where's Mrs. Taylor?
MEN.	Oh, oh, oh!
CAPTAIN.	And where's Mrs. Taylor?
MEN.	Oh, oh, oh!
CAPTAIN.	I'll bid you, fare you well,
MEN.	Oh, oh, oh!
CAPTAIN.	For I'm going back again.
MEN.	Oh, oh, oh!
CAPTAIN.	I'll bid you, fare you well, And a long fare you well.
MEN.	Oh, oh, oh!

They marched back and finished the pile. All then went to enjoy a good supper provided by Mr. Taylor, it being usual to kill an ox on such an occasion, Mr., Mrs., and the Misses Taylor waiting upon the slaves at supper.

What I have written cannot convey a tenth part of the spirit, humour, and mirth of the company; all joyous — singing, coming and going. But within one short fortnight [two weeks], at least thirty of this happy band were sold, many of them down South to unutterable horrors, soon to be used up. Reuben, the merry Captain of the band, a fine, spirited fellow who sang "Where's Mr. Taylor?" was one of those, dragged from his family. My heart is full when I think of his sad lot.



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