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Enslaved African Americans, Virginia, May 1862

## ON BEING A SLAVE

### SELECTIONS FROM 19<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY SLAVE NARRATIVES

In several hundred narratives published in the 1800s, formerly enslaved African Americans related their personal experiences of enslavement, escape, and freedom in the North. Many describe how, as children, they slowly gained the harsh awareness that they were not free like the white children in their midst, and how, as adults, they internally rebelled against their status as chattel property and strove for freedom, i.e., for the status of a human being. Presented here are perspectives on being a slave, the “darkest of fates,” from John Jacobs, James Curry, Lunsford Lane, Frederick Douglass, William Parker, Harriet Jacobs, and Josiah Henson.

■ To be a man, and not to be a man — a father without authority — a husband and no protector — is the darkest of fates. Such was the condition of my father, and such is the condition of every slave throughout the United States: he owns nothing, he can claim nothing. His wife is not his; his children are not his; they can be taken from him and sold at any minute, as far away from each other as the human fleshmonger may see fit to carry them. Slaves are recognized as property by the law and can own nothing except by the consent of their masters. A slave’s wife or daughter may be insulted before his eyes with impunity. He himself may be called on to torture them, and dare not refuse. To raise his hand in their defense is death by the law. He must bear all things and resist nothing. If he leaves his master’s premises at any time without a written permit, he is liable to be flogged.

Yet, it is said by slaveholders and their apologists that we are happy and contented. I will admit that slaves are sometimes cheerful; they sing and dance, as it is politic for them to do. I myself had changed owners three times before I could see the policy [wisdom] of this appearance of contentment. My father taught me to hate slavery but forgot to teach me how to conceal my hatred. I could frequently perceive the pent-up agony of his soul, although he tried hard to conceal it in his own breast. The knowledge that he was a slave himself, and that his children were also slaves, embittered his life, but made him love us the more.

JOHN JACOBS, “A True Tale of Slavery,” *The Leisure Hour: A Family Journal of Instruction and Recreation*, 7 Feb. 1861 ■

■ No slaves think they were made to be slaves. Let them keep them ever so ignorant, it is impossible to beat it into them that they were made to be slaves. I have heard some of the most ignorant I ever saw say “it will not always be so, God *will* bring them to an account.” I used to wonder why it was that our people were kept in slavery. I would look at the birds as they flew over my head or sung their free songs upon the trees, and think it strange that, of all God’s creatures, the poor negro only was held in bondage. I knew there were free states, but I thought the people there did not know how we were treated. I had heard of England and that *there*, there were no slaves; and I thought if I could only get there and tell my story, there would immediately be something done which would bring freedom to the slave.

JAMES CURRY, “Narrative of James Curry, A Fugitive Slave,” *The Liberator*, 10 January 1840 ■

■ When I began to work, I discovered the difference between myself and my master’s white children. They began to order me about, and were told to do so by my master and mistress. I found, too, that

they had learned to read, while I was not permitted to have a book in my hand. To be in the possession of anything written or printed was regarded as an offense. And then there was the fear that I might be sold away from those who were dear to me and conveyed to the far South. I had learned that being a slave I was subject to this worst (to us) of all calamities and I knew of others in similar situations to myself thus sold away. My friends were not numerous but in proportion as they were few they were dear and the thought that I might be separated from them forever was like that of having the heart torn from its socket, while the idea of being conveyed to the far South seemed infinitely worse than the terrors of death. To know, also, that I was never to consult my own will, but was, while I lived, to be entirely under the control of another was another state of mind hard for me to bear. Indeed all things now made me *feel* what I had before known only in words, that *I was a slave*. Deep was this feeling, and it preyed upon my heart like a never-dying worm.

LUNSFORD LANE, *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane*, 1842 ■

■ One fact, when I was a slave, often filled me with indignation.

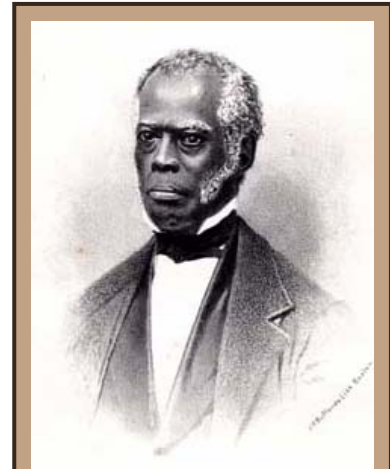
There were many poor white lads of about my own age, belonging to families scattered around, who were as poor in personal effects as we were; and yet, though our companions (when we chose to tolerate them), they did not have to be controlled by a master to go and come at his command, to be sold for his debts, or whenever he wanted extra pocket-money. The preachers of a slave-trading gospel frequently told us in their sermons that we should be “good boys” and not break into master’s hen-roost nor steal his bacon, but they never told this to these poor white people, although they knew very well that they encouraged the slaves to steal, trafficked in stolen goods, and stole themselves.

Why this difference? I felt I was the equal of these poor whites, and naturally I concluded that we were greatly wronged, and that all this talk about obedience, duty, humility, and honesty was, in the phrase of my companions, “all gammon.”<sup>1</sup>

WILLIAM PARKER, “The Freedman’s Story,” *Atlantic Monthly*, February/March 1866 ■

■ Living here, with my dear old grandmother and grandfather, it was a long time before I knew myself to be a *slave*. I knew many other things before I knew that. Grandmother and grandfather were the greatest people in the world to me; and being with them so snugly in their own little cabin — I supposed it be their own — knowing no higher authority over me or the other children than the authority of grandmamma, for a time there was nothing to disturb me; but, as I grew larger and older, I learned by degrees the sad fact that the “little hut” and the lot on which it stood belonged not to my dear old grandparents, but to some person who lived a great distance off and who was called, by grandmother, “OLD MASTER.” I further learned the sadder fact that not only the house and lot, but that grandmother herself (grandfather was free) and all the little children around her belonged to this mysterious personage, called by grandmother with every mark of reverence, “Old Master.”

Thus early did clouds and shadows begin to fall upon my path. Once on the track — troubles never come singly — I was not long in finding out another fact, still more grievous to my childish heart. I was told that this “old master,” whose name seemed ever to be mentioned with fear and shuddering, only allowed the children to live with grandmother for a limited time, and that in fact as soon as they were big enough, they were promptly taken away to live with the said “old master.” These were distressing revelations indeed; and though I was quite too young to comprehend the full import of the intelligence,



Lunsford Lane

*“Indeed all things now made me feel what I had before known only in words, that I was a slave. Deep was this feeling, and it preyed upon my heart like a never-dying worm.”*

<sup>1</sup> gammon: bacon/ham from the hind leg of the pig.

and mostly spent my childhood days in gleesome sports with the other children, a shade of disquiet rested upon me.

The absolute power of this distant “old master” had touched my young spirit with but the point of its cold, cruel iron, and left me something to brood over after the play and in moments of repose. Grandmammy was, indeed, at that time, all the world to me; and the thought of being separated from her, in any considerable time, was more than an unwelcome intruder. It was intolerable.

Children have their sorrows as well as men and women; and it would be well to remember this in our dealings with them. SLAVE-children *are* children, and prove no exceptions to the general rule. The liability to be separated from my grandmother, seldom or never to see her again, haunted me. I dreaded the thought of going to live with that mysterious “old master,” whose name I never heard mentioned with affection, but always with fear. I look back to this as among the heaviest of my childhood’s sorrows.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1855 ■

■ Although slavery was a delicate subject and, in Maryland, very cautiously talked about among grownup people, I frequently talked with the white boys about it, and that very freely. I would sometimes say to them, while seated on a curbstone or a cellar door, “I wish I could be free, as you will be when you get to be men.” “You will be free, you know, as soon as you are twenty-one, and can go where you like, but I am a slave for life. Have I not as good a right to be free as you have?” Words like these, I observed, always troubled them; and I had no small satisfaction in drawing out from them, as I occasionally did, that fresh and bitter condemnation of slavery which ever springs from natures unseared and unperverted.

Of all consciences, let me have those to deal with, which have not been seared and bewildered with the cares and perplexities of life. I do not remember ever while I was in slavery, to have met with a *boy* who defended the system, but I do remember many times, when I was consoled by them, and by them encouraged to hope that something would yet occur by which I would be made free. Over and over again, they have told me that “they believed I had as good a right to be free as *they* had” and that “they did not believe God ever made any one to be a slave.” It is easily seen that such little conversations with my playfellows had no tendency to weaken my love of liberty, nor to render me contented as a slave.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 1892 ■

■ But he was my master. I was compelled to live under the same roof with him — where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men. The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage. The degradation, the wrongs, the vices, that grow out of slavery, are more than I can describe. They are greater than you would willingly believe. . . .

I would ten thousand times rather that my children should be the half-starved paupers of Ireland than to be the most pampered among the slaves of America.

HARRIET JACOBS, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 1861 ■



In 1877, almost fifty years after he had escaped slavery, Josiah Henson returned to the Maryland plantation on which he had spent most of his enslaved life. On arriving, he is met by an African American boy.

“Does Mrs. Riley live here?” I asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Is she at home?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Can she be seen?”

“Dunno, sir; she’s poorly, and isn’t out of bed to-day.”

“Well, I have come a very long distance on purpose to see her.”

“I’ll ask,” said the boy, and vanished. Soon I heard a querulous voice ask within, “Who is he?”

“Dunno! He’s a black gemman.”

“And he wants to see me? Well, tell him to come in.”

We went in, and there was the old mistress, sure enough, but instead of the young, blooming woman of twenty, she was a poor, fretful invalid of seventy. Her bed was in the old sitting-room, which was the first place that I had seen that seemed at all familiar. The room and the old corner cupboard, where master used to keep his brandy, just as they were fifty years ago; but the furniture was scanty and dilapidated, and the floor was utterly bare; in fact, there was not a scrap of carpet in the whole house.

“I went up to her and bowed.

“How do you do, madam?”

“I am poorly — poorly. How do you do?”

“I am very well, thank you.”

“I — I don’t seem to know you,” said the poor creature, looking hard at me.

“Is that so? You have seen me many a time.”

“I don’t seem to,” she repeated, and thought a moment; when, suddenly springing up in bed, she exclaimed —

“*Can it be Si?*”

“Yes, madam.”

“Not Si Henson! — surely, surely, it can never be!”

“Yes, madam.”

“I cannot believe it,” she cried in great excitement. “Let me feel of your arms, then I shall know!”

I flung back my cloak, and she put her trembling hands on my arms that were shattered in her husband’s defense so long ago. Like the doubting Thomas, this convinced her. She burst into tears, and cried,

“It is Si! Indeed, it is Si! Oh! Si, your master is dead and gone!”

“No, madam. *My* master is alive.”

“I mean Mr. Riley. If only he was here you would be good friends now; I know you would. You were always a good man, Si. I never blamed you for running away. Oh! Si, don’t you wish you could see your old master again?”

“I tried to say yes, and to shed a tear with her; but I couldn’t get up a real honest cry, so I gave it up. Pretty soon she became quiet, and, looking at me more attentively, said,

“Why, Si, you are a gentleman!”

“I always was, madam.”

JOSIAH HENSON, *An Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson (“Uncle Tom”). From 1789 to 1881, 1881* ■

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