



A SLAVE AMONG SLAVES

An Excerpt from “Up From Slavery”

by Booker T. Washington

I was born a slave on a plantation in Franklin County, Virginia. As nearly as I have been able to learn, I was born near a crossroad's post office called Hale's Ford, and the year was 1858 or 1859.

My life had its beginning in the midst of most desolate and discouraging surroundings. This was not because my owners were especially cruel, for they were not, as compared with many others. I began life in a log cabin about fourteen by sixteen feet square. In

this cabin I lived with my brother and sister till after the Civil War, when we were all declared free.

The cabin was not only our living place, but was also used as the kitchen for the plantation. My mother was the plantation cook. The cabin was without glass windows; it had only openings in the side which let in the light, and also the cold, chilly air of winter. There was a door to the cabin—that is, something that was called a door—but the uncertain hinges by which it was hung, and the large cracks in it, to say nothing of the fact that it was too small, made the room a very uncomfortable one. There was no wooden floor in our cabin, the naked earth being used as a floor. In the centre of the earthen floor there was a large, deep opening covered with boards, which was used as a place for storing sweet potatoes during the winter. There was no cooking-stove on our plantation, and all the cooking for the whites and the slaves my mother had to do over an open fireplace, and mostly in pots and skillets.

The early years of my life were not very different from those of thousands of other slaves. My mother snatched a few moments for our care in the early morning before her work began, and at night after the day's work was done. We three children had a pallet on the dirt floor. I cannot remember having slept in a bed until after our family was declared free by the Emancipation Proclamation.

I have been asked to tell something about the sports I engaged in during my youth. Until that question was asked it had never occurred to me that there was never any time in my life for play; almost every day was occupied with some kind of labor. During my period of slavery I was not large enough to be of much service, still I was kept busy most of the time in cleaning the yards, carrying water to the men in the fields, or going to the mill

with corn once a week to be ground. This trip I always dreaded.

The heavy bag of corn would be thrown across the back of the horse, and the corn divided about evenly on each side. But in some way, almost without exception on these trips, the corn would so shift as to become unbalanced and would fall off the horse, and I would fall with it. As I was not strong enough to reload the corn upon the horse I would have to wait sometimes for hours, until a passer-by came along who would help me out of my trouble. I would be late in reaching the mill, and by the time I got my corn ground and reached home it would be far into the night. The road was a lonely one and led through dense forests. I was always frightened. Besides, when I was late in getting home I knew I would always get a severe scolding or a flogging.

I had no schooling whatever while I was a slave, though I remember going on several occasions as far as the school-house door with one of my young mistresses to carry her books. The picture of several dozen boys and girls in a schoolroom engaged in study made a deep impression on me, and I had the feeling that to get into a school-house and study in this way would be about the same as getting into paradise.

One may get the idea from what I have said that there was bitter feeling toward the white people on the part of my race because of the fact that most of the white population fought in a war which would result in keeping the negro in slavery if the South was successful. In the case of the slaves on our place this was not true, and it was not true of any large portion of the slaves in the South that were treated with any kind of decency. During the Civil War one of my young masters was killed and two were brought home severely wounded. The sorrow in the slave quarter was only second to that in the "big house." Some of the slaves begged to sit up at night and nurse their wounded masters.

The slave who was selected to sleep in the "big house" during the absence of the men was considered to have a place of honor. In order to defend and protect the women and children who were left on the plantation, the slaves would have laid down their lives.

But the slaves wanted freedom. I have never seen one who did not want to be free, or one who would return to slavery. I pity from the bottom of my heart any nation or body of people that is so unfortunate as to get entangled in the net of slavery.

No one section of our country was wholly responsible for its introduction and, besides, it was recognized and protected for years by the General Government. Then, when we rid ourselves of prejudice and race feeling, and look facts in the face, we see that the ten million negroes of this country who themselves or whose ancestors went through slavery, in spite of it, are in a better and more hopeful condition than the black people in any other part of the globe.

Ever since I have been old enough to think for myself, I have thought, in spite of the cruel wrongs inflicted upon us, the black man got nearly as much out of slavery as the white man did. The slave system, on our place, took the self reliance and self help out of the white people. My old master had many boys and girls but not one, so far as I know, ever learned a single trade. The girls were not taught to cook, sew or to take care of the house. All this was left to the slaves. The slaves, of course, had little interest in the life of the plantation, and they were too ignorant to do things in the most improved and thorough way. So the fences were out of repair and the gates hung half off their hinges, doors creaked, window panes were out, plastering fell and weeds grew in the yard. There was a waste of food and other materials, too, that was sad.

Finally the war closed, and the day of freedom approached. It would be a momentous day to all upon our plantation. We had been expecting it. Freedom was in the air, and had been for months. As the great day grew nearer, there was more singing in the slave quarters than usual. It was bolder, had more ring in it, and lasted far into the night. Most of the verses of the plantation songs had some reference to freedom. True, they had sung these same verses before, but they had felt that the freedom in these songs referred to the next world and not to the freedom of the body here. The night before the eventful day, word was sent to the slave quarters to the effect that something unusual was going to take place in the "big house" the next morning. There was little, if any, sleep that night. All was excitement and expectancy.

Early the next morning word was sent to all the slaves, young and old, to gather at the house. In company with my mother, brother, and sister, and a large company of other slaves I went to our master's house. All of our master's family were either standing or seated on the veranda of the house, where they could see what was to take place and hear what was said. There was a feeling of deep interest, or perhaps sadness, on their faces but not bitterness. They did not seem to be sad because of the loss of property, but rather at parting with those who they had reared and who were in many ways very close to them.

The most distinct thing that I now recall in connection with the scene was the presence of a United States officer who made a short speech and then read a rather long paper—the Emancipation Proclamation, I think. After the reading we were told that we were free, and could go when and where we pleased. My mother, who was standing by my side, leaned over and kissed her children while tears of joy ran down her cheeks. She explained to us what it all meant, that this was the day for which she had been so long praying, but fearing that she would never live to see.

For some moments there was great rejoicing and thanksgiving, but there was no feeling of bitterness. The wild joy of the emancipated colored people lasted for only a brief period and I noticed that by the time they returned to their cabins there was a change of feeling. The great responsibility of being free, of having charge of themselves, of having to think and plan for themselves and their children took possession of them. It was very much like turning a boy of ten or twelve years out into the world to provide for himself. In a few hours the great question with which the Anglo-Saxon race had been grappling for centuries had been thrown upon these people to solve—how to get a home, a living, how to rear their children, how to provide schools, establish citizenship and support churches.

To some it seemed that, now they were in actual possession of it, freedom was a more serious thing than they had expected to find it.

Some of the slaves were seventy or eighty years old; their best days were gone. They had no strength with which to earn a living in a strange place and among a strange people, even if they had been sure where to find a new place of abode. Besides, deep down in their hearts there was a strange and peculiar attachment to "old Missus," and to their children which they found it hard to think of breaking off. With these they had spent in some cases nearly half a century, and it was no light thing to think of parting.

Gradually, one by one, stealthily at first, the older slaves began to wander from the slave quarters back to the "big house" to have a whispered conversation with their former owners about the future.

Want to know more?

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