

## CHAPTER XII.

### RELIGIOUS NATURE AWAKENED.

Abolitionists spoken of—Eagerness to know the meaning of word—Consults the dictionary—Incendiary information—The enigma solved—"Nat Turner" insurrection—Cholera—Religion—Methodist minister—Religious impressions—Father Lawson—His character and occupation—His influence over me—Our mutual attachment—New hopes and aspirations—Heavenly light—Two Irishmen on wharf—Conversation with them—Learning to write—My aims.

IN the unhappy state of mind described in the foregoing chapter, regretting my very existence because doomed to a life of bondage, so goaded and so wretched as to be even tempted at times to take my own life, I was most keenly sensitive to know any and everything possible that had any relation to the subject of slavery. I was all ears, all eyes, whenever the words slave or slavery dropped from the lips of any white person, and the occasions became more and more frequent when these words became leading ones in high, social debate at our house. Very often I would overhear Master Hugh, or some of his company, speak with much warmth of the "*abolitionists.*" *Who* or what the *abolitionists* were, I was totally ignorant. I found, however, that whoever or whatever they might be, they were most cordially hated and abused by slaveholders of every grade. I very soon discovered too, that slavery was, in some sort, under consideration whenever the abolitionists were alluded to. This made the term a very interesting one to me. If a slave had made good his escape from slavery, it was generally alleged that he had been persuaded and assisted to do so by the abolitionists. If a slave killed his master, or struck down his overseer, or set fire to his master's dwelling, or committed any violence or crime, out of the common way, it was certain to be said that

such a crime was the legitimate fruits of the abolition movement. Hearing such charges often repeated, I, naturally enough, received the impression that abolition—whatever else it might be—was not unfriendly to the slave, nor very friendly to the slaveholder. I therefore set about finding out, if possible, *who* and *what* the abolitionists were, and *why* they were so obnoxious to the slaveholders. The dictionary offered me very little help. It taught me that abolition was “the act of abolishing;” but it left me in ignorance at the very point where I most wanted information, and that was, as to the thing to be abolished. A city newspaper—the “*Baltimore American*”—gave me the incendiary information denied me by the dictionary. In its columns I found that on a certain day a vast number of petitions and memorials had been presented to Congress, praying for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, and for the abolition of the slave trade between the States of the Union. This was enough. The vindictive bitterness, the marked caution, the studied reserve, and the ambiguity practiced by our white folks when alluding to this subject, was now fully explained. Ever after that, when I heard the word abolition, I felt the matter one of a personal concern, and I drew near to listen whenever I could do so, without seeming too solicitous and prying. There was HOPE in those words. Ever and anon too, I could see some terrible denunciation of slavery in our papers,—copied from abolition papers at the North,—and the injustice of such denunciation commented on. These I read with avidity. I had a deep satisfaction in the thought that the rascality of slaveholders was not concealed from the eyes of the world, and that I was not alone in abhorring the cruelty and brutality of slavery. A still deeper train of thought was stirred. I saw that there was fear as well as rage in the manner of speaking of the abolitionists, and from this I inferred that they must have some power in the country, and I felt that they might perhaps succeed in their designs. When I met with a slave to whom I deemed it safe to talk on the subject, I would

impart to him so much of the mystery as I had been able to penetrate. Thus the light of this grand movement broke in upon my mind by degrees; and I must say that ignorant as I was of the philosophy of that movement, I believed in it from the first, and I believed in it, partly, because I saw that it alarmed the consciences of the slaveholders. The insurrection of Nat. Turner had been quelled, but the alarm and terror which it occasioned had not subsided. The cholera was then on its way to this country, and I remember thinking that God was angry with the white people because of their slaveholding wickedness, and therefore his judgments were abroad in the land. Of course it was impossible for me not to hope much for the abolition movement when I saw it supported by the Almighty, and armed with DEATH.

Previously to my contemplation of the anti-slavery movement and its probable results, my mind had been seriously awakened to the subject of religion. I was not more than thirteen years old, when in my loneliness and destitution I longed for some one to whom I could go, as to a father and protector. The preaching of a white Methodist minister, named Hanson, was the means of causing me to feel that in God I had such a friend. He thought that all men, great and small, bond and free, were sinners in the sight of God: that they were by nature rebels against his government; and that they must repent of their sins, and be reconciled to God through Christ. I cannot say that I had a very distinct notion of what was required of me, but one thing I did know well: I was wretched and had no means of making myself otherwise. I consulted a good colored man named Charles Lawson, and in tones of holy affection he told me to pray, and to "cast all my care upon God." This I sought to do; and though for weeks I was a poor, broken-hearted mourner, traveling through doubts and fears, I finally found my burden lightened, and my heart relieved. I loved all mankind, slaveholders not excepted, though I abhorred slavery more than ever. I saw the world in a new light, and my great concern

was to have everybody converted. My desire to learn increased, and especially did I want a thorough acquaintance with the contents of the Bible. I have gathered scattered pages of the Bible from the filthy street-gutters, and washed and dried them, that in moments of leisure I might get a word or two of wisdom from them. While thus religiously seeking knowledge, I became acquainted with a good old colored man named Lawson. This man not only prayed three times a day, but he prayed as he walked through the streets, at his work, on his dray—everywhere. His life was a life of prayer, and his words when he spoke to any one, were about a better world. Uncle Lawson lived near Master Hugh's house, and becoming deeply attached to him, I went often with him to prayer-meeting, and spent much of my leisure time with him on Sunday. The old man could read a little, and I was a great help to him in making out the hard words, for I was a better reader than he. I could teach him "the letter," but he could teach me "the spirit," and refreshing times we had together, in singing and praying. These meetings went on for a long time without the knowledge of Master Hugh or my mistress. Both knew, however, that I had become religious, and seemed to respect my conscientious piety. My mistress was still a professor of religion, and belonged to class. Her leader was no less a person than Rev. Beverly Waugh, the presiding elder, and afterwards one of the bishops of the Methodist Episcopal church.

In view of the cares and anxieties incident to the life she was leading, and especially in view of the separation from religious associations to which she was subjected, my mistress had, as I have before stated, become lukewarm, and needed to be looked up by her leader. This often brought Mr. Waugh to our house, and gave me an opportunity to hear him exhort and pray. But my chief instructor in religious matters was Uncle Lawson. He was my spiritual father and I loved him intensely, and was at his house every chance I could get. This pleasure, however, was not long unquestioned. Master

Hugh became averse to our intimacy, and threatened to whip me if I ever went there again. I now felt myself persecuted by a wicked man, and I *would* go. The good old man had told me that the "Lord had a great work for me to do," and I must prepare to do it; that he had been shown that I must preach the gospel. His words made a very deep impression upon me, and I verily felt that some such work was before me, though I could not see how I could ever engage in its performance. "The good Lord would bring it to pass in his own good time," he said, and that I must go on reading and studying the scriptures. This advice and these suggestions were not without their influence on my character and destiny. He fanned my already intense love of knowledge into a flame by assuring me that I was to be a useful man in the world. When I would say to him, "How can these things be? and what can I do?" his simple reply was, "*Trust in the Lord.*" When I would tell him, "I am a slave, and a slave for life, how can I do anything?" he would quietly answer, "The *Lord* can make you free, my dear; all things are possible with Him; only have *faith* in God. 'Ask, and it shall be given you.' If you want liberty, ask the Lord for it *in FAITH, and he will give it to you.*"

Thus assured and thus cheered on under the inspiration of hope, I worked and prayed with a light heart, believing that my life was under the guidance of a wisdom higher than my own. With all other blessings sought at the mercy seat, I always prayed that God would, of his great mercy and in his own good time, deliver me from my bondage.

I went, one day, on the wharf of Mr. Waters, and seeing two Irishmen unloading a scow of stone or ballast, I went on board unasked, and helped them. When we had finished the work one of the men came to me, aside, and asked me a number of questions, and among them if I were a slave? I told him "I was a slave for life." The good Irishman gave a shrug, and seemed deeply affected. He said it was a pity so fine a little fellow as I was should be a slave for life. They both had much to say about the matter, and expressed the

deepest sympathy with me, and the most decided hatred of slavery. They went so far as to tell me that I ought to run away and go to the north; that I should find friends there, and that I should then be as free as anybody. I pretended not to be interested in what they said, for I feared they might be treacherous. White men were not unfrequently known to encourage slaves to escape, and then, to get the reward, they would kidnap them and return them to their masters. While I mainly inclined to the notion that these men were honest and meant me no ill, I feared it might be otherwise. I nevertheless remembered their words and their advice, and looked forward to an escape to the north as a possible means of gaining the liberty for which my heart panted. It was not my enslavement at the then present time which most affected me; the being a slave *for life* was the saddest thought. I was too young to think of running away immediately; besides, I wished to learn to write before going, as I might have occasion to write my own pass. I now not only had the hope of freedom, but a foreshadowing of the means by which I might some day gain that inestimable boon. Meanwhile I resolved to add to my educational attainments the art of writing.

After this manner I began to learn to write. I was much in the ship-yard—Master Hugh's, and that of Durgan & Bailey, and I observed that the carpenters, after hewing and getting ready a piece of timber to use, wrote on it the initials of the name of that part of the ship for which it was intended. When, for instance, a piece of timber was ready for the starboard side, it was marked with a capital "S." A piece for the larboard side was marked "L.;" larboard forward was marked "L. F.;" larboard aft was marked "L. A.;" starboard aft, "S. A.;" and starboard forward "S. F." I soon learned these letters, and for what they were placed on the timbers.

My work now was to keep fire under the steam-box, and to watch the ship-yard while the carpenters had gone to dinner. This interval gave me a fine opportunity for copying the letters named. I soon astonished myself with the ease with

which I made the letters, and the thought was soon present, "If I can make four letters I can make more." Having made these readily and easily, when I met boys about the Bethel church or on any of our play-grounds, I entered the lists with them in the art of writing, and would make the letters which I had been so fortunate as to learn, and ask them to "beat that if they could." With play-mates for my teachers, fences and pavements for my copy-books, and chalk for my pen and ink, I learned to write. I however adopted, afterward, various methods for improving my hand. The most successful was copying the *italics* in Webster's spelling-book until I could make them all without looking on the book. By this time my little "Master Tommy" had grown to be a big boy, and had written over a number of copy-books and brought them home. They had been shown to the neighbors, had elicited due praise, and had been laid carefully away. Spending parts of my time both at the ship-yard and the house, I was often the lone keeper of the latter as of the former. When my mistress left me in charge of the house I had a grand time. I got Master Tommy's copy-books and a pen and ink, and in the ample spaces between the lines I wrote other lines as nearly-like his as possible. The process was a tedious one, and I ran the risk of getting a flogging for marking the highly-prized copy-books of the oldest son. In addition to these opportunities, sleeping as I did in the kitchen loft, a room seldom visited by any of the family, I contrived to get a flour-barrel up there and a chair, and upon the head of that barrel I have written, or endeavored to write, copying from the Bible and the Methodist hymn-book, and other books which I had accumulated, till late at night, and when all the family were in bed and asleep. I was supported in my endeavors by renewed advice and by holy promises from the good father Lawson, with whom I continued to meet and pray and read the Scriptures. Although Master Hugh was aware of these meetings, I must say for his credit that he never executed his threats to whip me for having thus innocently employed my leisure time.