

CHAPTER XVIII.

NEW RELATIONS AND DUTIES.

Change of masters—Benefits derived by change—Fame of the fight with Covey—Reckless unconcern—Author's abhorrence of slavery—Ability to read a cause of prejudice—The holidays—How spent—Sharp hit at slavery—Effects of holidays—Difference between Covey and Freeland—An irreligious master preferred to a religious one—Hard life at Covey's useful to the author—Improved condition does not bring contentment—Congenial society at Freeland's—Author's Sabbath-school—Secresy necessary—Affectionate relations of tutor and pupils—Confidence and friendship among slaves—Slavery the inviter of vengeance.

MY term of service with Edward Covey expired on Christmas day, 1834. I gladly enough left him, although he was by this time as gentle as a lamb. My home for the year 1835 was already secured, my next master selected. There was always more or less excitement about the changing of hands, but I had become somewhat reckless and cared little into whose hands I fell, determined to fight my way. The report got abroad that I was hard to whip, that I was guilty of kicking back, that though generally a good-natured negro, I sometimes "got the devil in me." These sayings were rife in Talbot County, and they distinguished me among my servile brethren. Slaves would sometimes fight with each other, and even die at each other's hands, but there were very few who were not held in awe by a white man. Trained from the cradle up to think and feel that their masters were superior, and invested with a sort of sacredness, there were few who could rise above the control which that sentiment exercised. I had freed myself from it, and the thing was known. One bad sheep will spoil a whole flock. I was a bad sheep. I hated slavery, slaveholders, and all pertaining to them; and I did not fail to inspire others with

the same feeling wherever and whenever opportunity was presented. This made me a marked lad among the slaves, and a suspected one among slaveholders. A knowledge of my ability to read and write got pretty widely spread, which was very much against me.

The days between Christmas day and New Year's were allowed the slaves as holidays. During these days all regular work was suspended, and there was nothing to do but to keep fires and look after the stock. We regarded this time as our own by the grace of our masters, and we therefore used it or abused it as we pleased. Those who had families at a distance were expected to visit them and spend with them the entire week. The younger slaves or the unmarried ones were expected to see to the cattle, and to attend to incidental duties at home. The holidays were variously spent. The sober, thinking, industrious ones would employ themselves in manufacturing corn brooms, mats, horse collars, and baskets, and some of these were very well made. Another class spent their time in hunting opossums, coons, rabbits, and other game. But the majority spent the holidays in sports, ball-playing, wrestling, boxing, running foot-races, dancing, and drinking whiskey; and this latter mode was generally most agreeable to their masters. A slave who would work during the holidays was thought by his master undeserving of holidays. There was in this simple act of continued work an accusation against slaves, and a slave could not help thinking that if he made three dollars during the holidays he might make three hundred during the year. Not to be drunk during the holidays was disgraceful.

The fiddling, dancing, and "jubilee beating" was carried on in all directions. This latter performance was strictly southern. It supplied the place of violin, or of other musical instruments, and was played so easily that almost every farm had its "Juba" beater. The performer improvised as he beat the instrument, marking the words as he sang so as to have them fall pat with the movement of his hands. Among a

mass of nonsense and wild frolic, once in a while a sharp hit was given to the meanness of slaveholders. Take the following for example :

We raise de wheat,
 Dey gib us de corn ;
 We bake de bread,
 Dey gib us de crust ;
 We sif de meal,
 Dey gib us de huss ;

We peel de meat,
 Dey gib us de skin ;
 And dat's de way
 Dey take us in ;
 We skim de pot,
 Dey give us de liquor,

And say dat's good enough for nigger.

Walk over! walk over!
 Your butter and de fat;
 Poor nigger you cant get over dat.
 Walk over—

This is not a bad summary of the palpable injustice and fraud of slavery, giving, as it does, to the lazy and idle the comforts which God designed should be given solely to the honest laborer. But to the holidays. Judging from my own observation and experience, I believe those holidays were among the most effective means in the hands of slaveholders of keeping down the spirit of insurrection among the slaves.

To enslave men successfully and safely it is necessary to keep their minds occupied with thoughts and aspirations short of the liberty of which they are deprived. A certain degree of attainable good must be kept before them. These holidays served the purpose of keeping the minds of the slaves occupied with prospective pleasure within the limits of slavery. The young man could go wooing, the married man to see his wife, the father and mother to see their children, the industrious and money-loving could make a few dollars, the great wrestler could win laurels, the young people meet and enjoy each other's society, the drunken man could get plenty of whiskey, and the religious man could hold prayer-meetings, preach, pray, and exhort. Before the holidays there were pleasures in prospect; after the holidays they were pleasures of memory, and they served to keep out thoughts and wishes of a more dangerous character. These holidays were also

sort of conductors or safety-valves, to carry off the explosive elements inseparable from the human mind when reduced to the condition of slavery. But for these the rigors of bondage would have become too severe for endurance, and the slave would have been forced up to dangerous desperation.

Thus they became a part and parcel of the gross wrongs and inhumanity of slavery. Ostensibly they were institutions of benevolence designed to mitigate the rigors of slave life, but practically they were a fraud instituted by human selfishness, the better to secure the ends of injustice and oppression. The slave's happiness was not the end sought, but the master's safety. It was not from a generous unconcern for the slave's labor, but from a prudent regard for the slave system. I am strengthened in this opinion from the fact that most slaveholders liked to have their slaves spend the holidays in such manner as to be of no real benefit to them. Everything like rational enjoyment was frowned upon, and only those wild and low sports peculiar to semi-civilized people were encouraged. The license allowed appeared to have no other object than to disgust the slaves with their temporary freedom, and to make them as glad to return to their work as they were to leave it. I have known slaveholders resort to cunning tricks, with a view of getting their slaves deplorably drunk. The usual plan was to make bets on a slave that he could drink more whisky than any other, and so induce a rivalry among them for the mastery in this degradation. The scenes brought about in this way were often scandalous and loathsome in the extreme. Whole multitudes might be found stretched out in brutal drunkenness, at once helpless and disgusting. Thus, when the slave asked for hours of "virtuous liberty," his cunning master took advantage of his ignorance and cheered him with a dose of vicious and revolting dissipation artfully labeled with the name of "*liberty*."

We were induced to drink, I among the rest, and when the holidays were over we all staggered up from our filth and wallowing, took a long breath, and went away to our various

fields of work, feeling, upon the whole, rather glad to go from that which our masters had artfully deceived us into the belief was freedom, back again to the arms of slavery. It was not what we had taken it to be, nor what it would have been, had it not been abused by us. It was about as well to be a slave to master, as to be a slave to whisky and rum. When the slave was drunk the slaveholder had no fear that he would plan an insurrection, no fear that he would escape to the North. It was the sober, thoughtful slave who was dangerous, and needed the vigilance of his master to keep him a slave. But to proceed with my narrative.

On the first of January, 1835, I proceeded from St. Michaels to Mr. William Freeland's—my new home. Mr. Freeland lived only three miles from St. Michaels, on an old, worn-out farm, which required much labor to render it anything like a self-supporting establishment.

I found Mr. Freeland a different man from Covey. Though not rich, he was what might have been called a well-bred Southern gentleman. Though a slaveholder and sharing in common with them many of the vices of his class, he seemed alive to the sentiment of honor, and had also some sense of justice, and some feelings of humanity. He was fretful, impulsive, and passionate, but free from the mean and selfish characteristics which distinguished the creature from which I had happily escaped. Mr. Freeland was open, frank, imperative, and practiced no concealments, and disdained to play the spy; in all these qualities the opposite of Covey.

My poor weather-beaten bark now reached smoother water and gentler breezes. My stormy life at Covey's had been of service to me. The things that would have seemed very hard had I gone direct to Mr. Freeland's from the home of Master Thomas were now "trifles light as air." I was still a field-hand, and had come to prefer the severe labor of the field to the enervating duties of a house-servant. I had become large and strong, and had begun to take pride in the fact that I could do as much hard work as some of the older men. There

was much rivalry among slaves at times as to which could do the most work, and masters generally sought to promote such rivalry. But some of us were too wise to race with each other very long. Such racing, we had the sagacity to see, was not likely to pay. We had our times for measuring each other's strength, but we knew too much to keep up the competition so long as to produce an extraordinary day's work. We knew that if by extraordinary exertion a large quantity of work was done in one day, becoming known to the master, it might lead him to require the same amount every day. This thought was enough to bring us to a dead halt when ever so much excited for the race.

At Mr. Freeland's my condition was every way improved. I was no longer the scapegoat that I was when at Covey's, where every wrong thing done was saddled upon me, and where other slaves were whipped over my shoulders. Bill Smith was protected by a positive prohibition, made by his rich master (and the command of the *rich* slaveholder was *law* to the poor one). Hughes was favored by his relationship to Covey, and the hands hired temporarily escaped flogging. I was the general pack-horse; but Mr. Freeland held every man individually responsible for his own conduct. Mr. Freeland, like Mr. Covey, gave his hands enough to eat, but, unlike Mr. Covey, he gave them time to take their meals. He worked us hard during the day, but gave us the night for rest. We were seldom in the field after dark in the evening, or before sunrise in the morning. Our implements of husbandry were of the most improved pattern, and much superior to those used at Covey's.

Notwithstanding all the improvement in my relations, notwithstanding the many advantages I had gained by my new home and my new master, I was still restless and discontented. I was about as hard to please by a master as a master is by a slave. The freedom from bodily torture and unceasing labor had given my mind an increased sensibility, and imparted to it greater activity. I was not yet exactly in

right relations. "Howbeit, that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural, and afterward that which is spiritual." When entombed at Covey's, shrouded in darkness and physical wretchedness, temporal well-being was the grand desideratum; but, temporal wants supplied, the spirit puts in its claims. Beat and cuff your slave, keep him hungry and spiritless, and he will follow the chain of his master like a dog; but feed and clothe him well, work him moderately, surround him with physical comfort, and dreams of freedom intrude. Give him a *bad* master, and he aspires to a good master; give him a good master and he wishes to become his own master. Such is human nature. You may hurl a man so low beneath the level of his kind, that he loses all just ideas of his natural position, but elevate him a little, and the clear conception of rights rises to life and power, and leads him onward. Thus elevated a little at Freeland's, the dreams called into being by that good man, Father Lawson, when in Baltimore, began to visit me again; shoots from the tree of liberty began to put forth buds, and dim hopes of the future began to dawn.

I found myself in congenial society. There were Henry Harris, John Harris, Handy Caldwell, and Sandy Jenkins (this last, of the root-preventive memory.)

Henry and John Harris were brothers, and belonged to Mr. Freeland. They were both remarkably bright and intelligent, though neither of them could read. Now for mischief! I had not been long here before I was up to my old tricks. I began to address my companions on the subject of education, and the advantages of intelligence over ignorance, and, as far as I dared, I tried to show the agency of ignorance in keeping men in slavery. Webster's spelling-book and the Columbian Orator were looked into again. As summer came on, and the long Sabbath days stretched themselves over our idleness, I became uneasy, and wanted a Sabbath-school, where to exercise my gifts, and to impart the little knowledge I possessed to my brother-slaves. A house was hardly necessary in the

summer time; I could hold my school under the shade of an old oak tree as well as anywhere else. The thing was to get the scholars, and to have them thoroughly imbued with the desire to learn. Two such boys were quickly found in Henry and John, and from them the contagion spread. I was not long in bringing around me twenty or thirty young men, who enrolled themselves gladly in my Sabbath-school, and were willing to meet me regularly under the trees or elsewhere, for the purpose of learning to read. It was surprising with what ease they provided themselves with spelling-books. These were mostly the cast-off books of their young masters or mistresses. I taught at first on our own farm. All were impressed with the necessity of keeping the matter as private as possible, for the fate of the St. Michaels attempt was still fresh in the minds of all. Our pious masters at St. Michaels must not know that a few of their dusky brothers were learning to read the Word of God, lest they should come down upon us with the lash and chain. We might have met to drink whisky, to wrestle, fight, and to do other unseemly things, with no fear of interruption from the saints or the sinners of St. Michaels. But to meet for the purpose of improving the mind and heart, by learning to read the sacred scriptures, was a nuisance to be instantly stopped. The slaveholders there, like slaveholders elsewhere, preferred to see the slaves engaged in degrading sports, rather than acting like moral and accountable beings. Had any one asked a religious white man in St. Michaels at that time the names of three men in that town whose lives were most after the pattern of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, the reply would have been: Garrison West, class-leader, Wright Fairbanks, and Thomas Auld, both also class-leaders; and yet these men ferociously rushed in upon my Sabbath-school, armed with mob-like missiles, and forbade our meeting again on pain of having our backs subjected to the bloody lash. This same Garrison West was my class-leader, and I had thought him a Christian until he took part in breaking up my school. He led me no more after that.

The plea for this outrage was then, as it is always, the

tyrant's plea of necessity. If the slaves learned to read they would learn something more and something worse. The peace of slavery would be disturbed; slave rule would be endangered. I do not dispute the soundness of the reasoning. If slavery were right, Sabbath-schools for teaching slaves to read were wrong, and ought to have been put down. These christian class-leaders were, to this extent, consistent. They had settled the question that slavery was right, and by that standard they determined that Sabbath-schools were wrong. To be sure they were Protestant, and held to the great protestant right of every man to "search the Scriptures" for himself; but then, to all general rules there are exceptions. How convenient! What crimes may not be committed under such ruling! But my dear class-leading Methodist brethren did not condescend to give me a reason for breaking up the school at St. Michaels; they had determined its destruction, and that was enough. However, I am digressing.

After getting the school nicely started a second time, holding it in the woods behind the barn, and in the shade of trees, I succeeded in inducing a free colored man who lived several miles from our house to permit me to hold my school in a room at his house. He incurred much peril in doing so, for the assemblage was an unlawful one. I had at one time more than forty scholars, all of the right sort, and many of them succeeded in learning to read. I have had various employments during my life, but I look back to none with more satisfaction. An attachment, deep and permanent, sprung up between me and my persecuted pupils, which made my parting from them intensely painful.

Besides my Sunday-school, I devoted three evenings a week to my other fellow slaves during the winter. Those dear souls who came to my Sabbath-school came not because it was popular or reputable to do so, for they came with a liability of having forty stripes laid on their naked backs. In this Christian country men and women were obliged to hide in barns and woods and trees from professing Christians, in order to learn to read the *Holy Bible*. Their minds had been

cramped and starved by their cruel masters ; the light of education had been completely excluded, and their hard earnings had been taken to educate their master's children. I felt a delight in circumventing the tyrants, and in blessing victims of their curses.

The year at Mr. Freeland's passed off very smoothly, to outward seeming. Not a blow was given me during the whole year. To the credit of Mr. Freeland, irreligious though he was, it must be stated that he was the best master I ever had until I became my own master and assumed for myself, as I had a right to do, the responsibility of my own existence and the exercise of my own powers.

For much of the happiness, or absence of misery, with which I passed this year, I am indebted to the genial temper and ardent friendship of my brother slaves. They were every one of them manly, generous, and brave ; yes, I say they were brave, and I will add fine looking. It is seldom the lot of any to have truer and better friends than were the slaves on this farm. It was not uncommon to charge slaves with great treachery toward each other, but I must say I never loved, esteemed, or confided in men more than I did in these. They were as true as steel, and no band of brothers could be more loving. There were no mean advantages taken of each other, no tattling, no giving each other bad names to Mr. Freeland, and no elevating one at the expense of the other. We never undertook anything of any importance which was likely to affect each other, without mutual consultation. We were generally a unit, and moved together. Thoughts and sentiments were exchanged between us which might well have been considered incendiary had they been known by our masters. The slave-holder, were he kind or cruel, was a slave-holder still, the every-hour-violator of the just and inalienable rights of man, and he was therefore every hour silently but surely whetting the knife of vengeance for his own throat. He never lisped a syllable in commendation of the fathers of this republic without inviting the sword, and asserting the right of rebellion for his own slaves.