

CHAPTER XXI.

ESCAPE FROM SLAVERY.

Closing incidents in my "Life as a Slave"—Discontent—Suspicious—Master's generosity—Difficulties in the way of escape—Plan to obtain money—Allowed to hire my time—A gleam of hope—Attend camp-meeting—Anger of Master Hugh—The result—Plans of escape—Day for departure fixed—Harassing doubts and fears—Painful thoughts of separation from friends.

MY condition during the year of my escape (1838) was comparatively a free and easy one, so far, at least, as the wants of the physical man were concerned; but the reader will bear in mind that my troubles from the beginning had been less physical than mental, and he will thus be prepared to find that slave life was adding nothing to its charms for me as I grew older, and became more and more acquainted with it. The practice from week to week of openly robbing me of all my earnings, kept the nature and character of slavery constantly before me. I could be robbed by indirection, but this was too open and barefaced to be endured. I could see no reason why I should, at the end of each week, pour the reward of my honest toil into the purse of my master. My obligation to do this vexed me, and the manner in which Master Hugh received my wages vexed me yet more. Carefully counting the money, and rolling it out dollar by dollar, he would look me in the face as if he would search my heart as well as my pocket, and reproachfully ask me, "Is that all?"—implying that I had perhaps kept back part of my wages; or, if not so, the demand was made possibly to make me feel that after all, I was an "unprofitable servant." Draining me of the last cent of my hard earnings, he would, however, occasionally, when I brought home an extra large sum, dole out to me a sixpence or a shilling, with

a view, perhaps, of kindling up my gratitude. But it had the opposite effect; it was an admission of my right to the whole sum. The fact that he gave me any part of my wages, was proof that he suspected I had a right to the whole of them; and I always felt uncomfortable after having received anything in this way, lest his giving me a few cents might possibly ease his conscience, and make him feel himself to be a pretty honorable robber after all.

Held to a strict account, and kept under a close watch,—the old suspicion of my running away not having been entirely removed,—to accomplish my escape seemed a very difficult thing. The railroad from Baltimore to Philadelphia was under regulations so stringent that even *free* colored travelers were almost excluded. They must have free papers; they must be measured and carefully examined before they could enter the cars, and could go only in the day time, even when so examined. The steamboats were under regulations equally stringent. And still more, and worse than all, all the great turnpikes leading northward were beset with kidnapers; a class of men who watched the newspapers for advertisements for runaway slaves, thus making their living by the accursed reward of slave-hunting.

My discontent grew upon me, and I was on a constant lookout for means to get away. With money I could easily have managed the matter, and from this consideration I hit upon the plan of soliciting the privilege of hiring my time. It was quite common in Baltimore to allow slaves this privilege, and was the practice also in New Orleans. A slave who was considered trustworthy could, by paying his master a definite sum regularly, at the end of each week, dispose of his time as he liked. It so happened that I was not in very good odor, and I was far from being a trustworthy slave. Nevertheless, I watched my opportunity when Master Thomas came to Baltimore (for I was still his property, Hugh only acting as his agent) in the spring of 1838, to purchase his spring supply of goods, and applied to him directly for the much-coveted privi-

lege of hiring my time. This request Master Thomas unhesitatingly refused to grant; and he charged me, with some sternness, with inventing this stratagem to make my escape. He told me I could go *nowhere* but he would catch me; and, in the event of my running away, I might be assured he should spare no pains in his efforts to recapture me. He recounted, with a good deal of eloquence, the many kind offices he had done me, and exhorted me to be contented and obedient. "Lay out no plans for the future," said he; "if you behave yourself properly, I will take care of you." Now, kind and considerate as this offer was, it failed to soothe me into repose. In spite of all Master Thomas had said, and in spite of my own efforts to the contrary, the injustice and wickedness of slavery was always uppermost in my thoughts, strengthening my purpose to make my escape at the earliest moment possible.

About two months after applying to Master Thomas for the privilege of hiring my time, I applied to Master Hugh for the same liberty, supposing him to be unacquainted with the fact that I had made a similar application to Master Thomas, and had been refused. My boldness in making this request fairly astounded him at first. He gazed at me in amazement. But I had many good reasons for pressing the matter, and, after listening to them awhile, he did not absolutely refuse, but told me he would think of it. There was hope for me in this. Once master of my own time, I felt sure that I could make over and above my obligation to him, a dollar or two every week. Some slaves had made enough in this way to purchase their freedom. It was a sharp spur to their industry; and some of the most enterprising colored men in Baltimore hired themselves in that way.

After mature reflection, as I suppose it was, Master Hugh granted me the privilege in question, on the following terms: I was to be allowed all my time; to make all bargains for work, and to collect my own wages; and in return for this liberty, I was required or obliged to pay him three dollars at the end of each week, and to board and clothe myself, and

buy my own calking tools. A failure in any of these particulars would put an end to the privilege. This was a hard bargain. The wear and tear of clothing, the losing and breaking of tools, and the expense of board made it necessary for me to earn at least six dollars per week to keep even with the world. All who are acquainted with calking know how uncertain and irregular that employment is. It can be done to advantage only in dry weather, for it is useless to put wet oakum into a ship's seam. Rain or shine, however, work or no work, at the end of each week the money must be forthcoming.

Master Hugh seemed much pleased with this arrangement for a time; and well he might be, for it was decidedly in his favor. It relieved him of all anxiety concerning me. His money was sure. He had armed my love of liberty with a lash and a driver far more efficient than any I had before known; and while he derived all the benefits of slaveholding by the arrangement, without its evils, I endured all the evils of being a slave, and yet suffered all the care and anxiety of a responsible freeman. "Nevertheless," thought I, "it is a valuable privilege—another step in my career toward freedom." It was something even to be permitted to stagger under the disadvantages of liberty, and I was determined to hold on to the newly gained footing by all proper industry. I was ready to work by night as by day, and being in the possession of excellent health, I was not only able to meet my current expenses, but also to lay by a small sum at the end of each week. All went on thus from the month of May till August; then, for reasons which will become apparent as I proceed, my much-valued liberty was wrested from me.

During the week previous to this calamitous event, I had made arrangements with a few young friends to accompany them on Saturday night to a camp-meeting, to be held about twelve miles from Baltimore. On the evening of our intended start for the camp-ground, something occurred in the ship-yard where I was at work which detained me unusually late,

and compelled me either to disappoint my friends, or to neglect carrying my weekly dues to Master Hugh. Knowing that I had the money and could hand it to him on another day, I decided to go to camp-meeting, and to pay him the three dollars for the past week on my return. Once on the camp-ground, I was induced to remain one day longer than I had intended when I left home. But as soon as I returned I went directly to his home on Fell street to hand him his (my) money. Unhappily the fatal mistake had been made. I found him exceedingly angry. He exhibited all the signs of apprehension and wrath which a slaveholder might be surmised to exhibit on the supposed escape of a favorite slave. "You rascal! I have a great mind to give you a sound whipping. How dare you go out of the city without first asking and obtaining my permission?" "Sir," I said, "I hired my time and paid you the price you asked for it. I did not know that it was any part of the bargain that I should ask you when or where I should go." "You did not know, you rascal! You are bound to show yourself here every Saturday night." After reflecting a few moments, he became somewhat cooled down; but evidently greatly troubled, he said: "Now, you scoundrel, you have done for yourself; you shall hire your time no longer. The next thing I shall hear of will be your running away. Bring home your tools at once. I'll teach you how to go off in this way."

Thus ended my partial freedom. I could hire my time no longer; and I obeyed my master's orders at once. The little taste of liberty which I had had—although as it will be seen, that taste was far from being unalloyed—by no means enhanced my contentment with slavery. Punished by Master Hugh, it was now my turn to punish him. "Since," thought I, "you *will* make a slave of me, I will await your order in all things." So, instead of going to look for work on Monday morning, as I had formerly done, I remained at home during the entire week, without the performance of a single stroke of work. Saturday night came, and he called upon me as usual

for my wages. I, of course, told him I had done no work, and had no wages. Here we were at the point of coming to blows. His wrath had been accumulating during the whole week; for he evidently saw that I was making no effort to get work, but was most aggravatingly awaiting his orders in all things. As I look back to this behavior of mine, I scarcely know what possessed me, thus to trifle with one who had such unlimited power to bless or blast me. Master Hugh raved, and swore he would "get hold of me," but wisely for *him*, and happily for *me*, his wrath employed only those harmless, impalpable missiles which roll from a limber tongue. In my desperation I had fully made up my mind to measure strength with him, in case he should attempt to execute his threats. I am glad there was no occasion for this, for resistance to him could not have ended so happily for me as it did in the case of Covey. Master Hugh was not a man to be safely resisted by a slave; and I freely own that in my conduct toward him, in this instance, there was more folly than wisdom. He closed his reproofs by telling me that hereafter I need give myself no uneasiness about getting work; he "would himself see to getting work for me, and enough of it at that." This threat, I confess, had some terror in it, and on thinking the matter over during the Sunday, I resolved not only to save him the trouble of getting me work, but that on the third day of September I would attempt to make my escape. His refusal to allow me to hire my time therefore hastened the period of my flight. I had three weeks in which to prepare for my journey.

Once resolved, I felt a certain degree of repose, and on Monday morning, instead of waiting for Master Hugh to seek employment for me, I was up by break of day, and off to the ship-yard of Mr. Butler, on the City Block, near the draw-bridge. I was a favorite with Mr. Butler, and, young as I was, I had served as his foreman, on the float-stage, at calking. Of course I easily obtained work, and at the end of the week, which, by the way, was exceedingly fine, I brought Master Hugh nine dollars. The effect of this mark of returning

good sense on my part, was excellent. He was very much pleased: he took the money, commended me, and told me I might have done the same thing the week before. It is a blessed thing that the tyrant may not always know the thoughts and purposes of his victim. Master Hugh little knew my plans. The going to camp-meeting without asking his permission, the insolent answers to his reproaches, the sulky deportment of the week after being deprived of the privilege of hiring my time, had awakened the suspicion that I might be cherishing disloyal purposes. My object, therefore, in working steadily was to remove suspicion; and in this I succeeded admirably. He probably thought I was never better satisfied with my condition than at the very time I was planning my escape. The second week passed, and I again carried him my full week's wages—*nine dollars*; and so well pleased was he that he gave me *twenty-five cents!* and bade me "make good use of it." I told him I would do so, for one of the uses to which I intended to put it was to pay my fare on the "underground railroad."

Things without went on as usual; but I was passing through the same internal excitement and anxiety which I had experienced two years and a half before. The failure in that instance was not calculated to increase my confidence in the success of this, my second attempt; and I knew that a second failure could not leave me where my first did. I must either get to the *far North* or *be sent* to the *far South*. Besides the exercise of mind from this state of facts, I had the painful sensation of being about to separate from a circle of honest and warm-hearted friends. The thought of such a separation, where the hope of ever meeting again was excluded, and where there could be no correspondence, was very painful. It is my opinion that thousands more would have escaped from slavery but for the strong affection which bound them to their families, relatives, and friends. The daughter was hindered by the love she bore her mother, and the father by the love he bore his wife and children, and so on to the end of the

chapter. I had no relations in Baltimore, and I saw no probability of ever living in the neighborhood of sisters and brothers; but the thought of leaving my friends was the strongest obstacle to my running away. The last two days of the week, Friday and Saturday, were spent mostly in collecting my things together for my journey. Having worked four days that week for my master, I handed him six dollars on Saturday night. I seldom spent my Sundays at home, and for fear that something might be discovered in my conduct, I kept up my custom and absented myself all day. On Monday, the third day of September, 1838, in accordance with my resolution, I bade farewell to the city of Baltimore, and to that slavery which had been my abhorrence from childhood.