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Early Life

ACCORDING to information received from my mother, if the reckoning is correct, I was born 7th August, 1836, at Rock-Rayman, in the State of Virginia. I do not know the district, having been “removed” from thence when but a child. From what I have heard my mother say about her father, it would appear that he came from Africa, and was of the Guinea tribe. Both my mother’s parents died when she was quite young. Her brothers and sisters were sold when she was thirteen years old. She often spoke of them and of the cruel treatment she received in her youth. My father was an octoroon, that is, he was one-eighth negro blood, and he was a free man. When I was three years old, Mr. Brent, who owned me, removed to Alexandria, Virginia. My father then wanted to purchase my mother and myself, but our master would not sell us. It must be explained that a free man was permitted to marry a slave woman, but the woman’s children would be slaves. My father died when I was nine years old, he left money for me to purchase my freedom when I became a man, but the money got into other people’s hands and never reached me.

I can well remember when other little children and I were very happy, not knowing that we were slaves.

We played merrily together, knowing nothing of the world and of the long oppression of our people. But as time passed on, first one and then another of those who were as helpless as myself were missed from the company of little slaves. One day we saw John, who was much older than the rest, with a small bundle in his hand, saying good-bye to his mother, while a white man stood waiting in the hall for him. His mother and mine, with others, were crying, and all seemed very sad. I did not know what to make of it. A vague fear came over me, but I did not know why. We heard that the man who took John away was a “Georgia Trader,” or slave dealer. Whenever we saw a white man looking over the fence as we were at play, we would run and hide, sometimes getting near our mothers, ignorantly thinking

they could protect us. But another and again another of us would be taken away. All this showed to us the difference—the great difference—there was between the white and coloured children. White children were free—“free born”—but black children were slaves and could be sold for money. What seemed worse than all was the discovery that our mothers, whom we looked upon as our only protectors, could not help us. Often we were reminded that if we were not good the white people would sell us to Georgia, which place we dreaded above all others on earth.

Mr. Brent, our owner, held some office in the Government, and he removed to Washington when I was about seven or eight years old. I was dressed up and sent into the dining-room at each meal to drive away the flies from the table, and to carry out the dishes and other things. At night I had to bring in my young master’s slippers. When I brought them in I was told: “This slipper is for the right foot, and that for the left.” Up to this time I did not know what was meant by “right” and “left,” and could not understand the difference. The next night when I brought in the slippers I put the left foot one on the right foot. My master was very angry, and gave me a slap on the head. Night after night, with fear and trembling I would carry in the slippers. Sometimes I accidentally got them right, but more often they were wrong; then would I receive a blow on the head either with the hand or with the slippers. When I did get them right, then he would declare that I knew the right way all the time.

My poor mother, to whom I looked for protection, could do nothing. I can remember how, after my being ill-treated, mother would say, with tears in her eyes, “My son, be a good boy.” Oh, the memory of a loving and patient mother. She taught me what she knew. The whole of her education consisted in a knowledge of the Alphabet, and how to count a hundred. She first taught me the Lord’s Prayer. And as soon as I was old enough, she explained to me the difference between the condition of the coloured and white people, and told me that if I would learn how to read and write, some day I might be able to get my freedom; but all that would have to be kept a secret. If a slave were known to teach another slave, he would be liable to be sent to the whipping-post, or he might at once be sold; for the law was very strict with regard to slaves in this matter—they were forbidden education. The Legislature of the State of Louisiana, U.S.A., during the days of slavery passed an Act that—“Whosoever shall make use language in any

public discourse, or shall make use of signs or actions having a tendency to produce discontent amongst the coloured population, shall suffer imprisonment and hard labour, not less than three years nor more than twenty-one years, or *death* at the discretion of the Court.” And slaves were not allowed to be taught in Sabbath Schools; whoever taught such a school would “be fined five hundred dollars.” In Virginia and South Carolina, any school for teaching reading and writing, either to slaves or free people, was considered an unlawful assembly. If found out, the penalty for each pupil was twenty lashes. It was made the duty of any Justice of the Peace to issue his warrant to enter any house or school-house or meeting where coloured people would be likely to receive instruction. The law in Virginia was not so strict respecting Sunday School lessons, if the master made no objections. In the city of Savannah, Ga., an ordinance was made by which “Any person that teaches a person of colour, slave or free, to read and write, or cause such person to be so taught, is subject to a fine of thirty dollars for each offence; and every person of colour who shall teach reading or writing to be imprisoned ten days and whipped thirty-nine lashes.”

My mother’s heartfelt desire seems to have been that I should be taught to read and write; and no opportunity was lost in trying to inspire me to look forward to freedom and an education. She told me what she knew about heaven, where there would be no slaves — all would be free. Oh, I used to think how nice it must be in heaven, “*no slaves, all free,*” and God would think as much of the black people as he did of the white. Then mother would talk of Africa; how that they were once all free there, but white people stole us from our country and made slaves of us. This appeared to be all she knew of the matter. I do thank my Blessed Jesus that she knew so much; it was the germ of all I know today. My mother’s advice and my mother’s teaching will ever remain fresh in my memory. I cannot forget her tears as she looked upon me with a mother’s love, more than sixty years ago, and told me what little she knew. To her, as to thousands of poor slaves, the Bible was almost a sealed book. I remember her tenderness, and the deep security I felt when, in the evenings of my childhood, nestling in her arms, I listened as she told me how she loved me; not knowing what was passing through that loving mother’s breast as her tearful eyes looked upon me. I was the first and only child at that time.

The few following lines, which I put together and often sang, I call

“Memories of Childhood,” and frequently sing them now in memory of my dear mother:

Yes, I remember, remember well,
 When at my mother’s knee she often would tell
 Of that sweet prayer the disciples prayed,
 Taught by the Lord who should be obeyed:

Our Father, which art in heaven; hallowed be Thy Name; Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done in earth as it is done in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the Kingdom, and the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

And then, in conclusion,
 Mother taught me to say,
 In childlike simplicity,
 At the close of day:
 Now I lay me down to sleep,
 I pray the Lord my soul to keep;
 If I should die before I wake, I pray
 the Lord my soul to take.

My master was sent on Government business to Buenos Ayres. Some of the slaves were sent to the farm, but others were left in the hands of an agent at Washington. My mother took advantage of this opportunity and paid a freeman fifty cents to teach me for one month. All that I can remember of those lessons is: ab, eb, ib, ob, ub, ac, ec, ic, oc, uc, and similar simple combinations. This was found out by one of the young masters, who was left at home, and in consequence thereof I was sent to Fredricksburg, down in Virginia, to a farm there. After the master’s return he settled down on a farm near Alexandria, Virginia, where in two years he died. The estate was divided. It was my lot to fall into the hands of the son who used to cuff me concerning his slippers. He was a doctor, and settled in Fairfax County, Va., and at first boarded with a family of Northern people, who were very kind to me. He found this out, and he desired Mrs. Barrett, the lady of the house, not to permit me to repeat any lesson after the children, nor in any way to give me instruction. He removed to another family to

board. When he went from home he left instructions with the gentleman with whom he boarded to do as he liked with me, and he did not fail to use his authority. My own master would often whip me for the most trivial thing, and I was treated in a most cruel manner, far away from my mother, whose sympathy in the past was most precious to me. When only twelve years old I often thought of freedom, and as time passed away I made enquiries respecting Canada. This was the second time I was away from my mother, and I had not much hope of ever seeing her again. ‘Freedom’ was the subject that occupied my mind greatly at this time.

I heard that the Queen of England had given large sums of money to set the coloured people free, and I felt that if I could reach Canada I should be safe. It may be of interest if I mention that we had the idea on the plantation that the Queen was black, because she was so kind. Accustomed to nothing but cruelty at the hands of the white people, we had never imagined that a great ruler so kind to coloured people could be other than black; so the impression was that Queen Victoria was a coloured lady. To me she was the subject of many a dream; she often came before my mind, and filled my imagination with all manner of ideas as to the kind of person she was. I used to picture her as a black lady, amidst numerous coloured attendants, surrounded by a grandeur that exceeded all I had ever seen amongst the wealthy white people. And then I thought what a happy thing it must be to live under the reign of so good a Queen. Many stories were circulated concerning Victoria. Amongst the rest I remember one which had great interest for us. We had the impression that a hogshead (in which tobacco was packed) was the largest measure in existence, and it was reported that the Queen had sent a hogshead of money to purchase the liberty of us poor slaves; but that the money had got into the hands of the white people, who, instead of granting freedom to us, had kept the money for themselves, and still kept us as slaves. The origin of this story I cannot understand, except on the theory that the Queen, who had freed so many slaves in other parts, and whose Government had paid so much to liberate those in slavery, would not willingly leave us in bondage. Alas! there was no way for me to make my escape; the door seemed closed against me.

I would often think of my mother’s parting blessing. She put her hand upon my head, and slowly said, “Good-bye, my son; God bless you. Be a good boy, say your prayers, and try hard to seek religion.

The fortune-teller said you were born to good luck." I would look at the sun, and see how beautifully it shone on everything; all was bright but the poor slaves, who were doomed to drag out a miserable existence in bondage, classed as goods and chattels. Their condition was that of dumb creatures; their time, talents, mind and body were all claimed by the slave-owner, whose power over the slaves was absolute. The slave had no legal rights. In no respect whatever was he protected; beyond his master he had no appeal; he was not allowed to give evidence against a white man; his wife and children were by law "things" — chattels — the property of their master, to whom they were compelled to yield implicit obedience. "The New Orleans Bee" newspaper of the 14th October, 18 — , says: "The slave who struck some citizens in Canel Street some weeks since has been tried and found guilty, and is sentenced to be hung on the 24th inst." The Quarterly Anti-Slavery Magazine, July, 1837: "The labour of the slave was compulsory and without any remuneration. The kind of labour, the amount of toil, the time allowed for rest, were all decided by the master or overseer. The clothing, food, and bedding, both as to quality and quantity, depended upon the kind of master the slaves had. Some masters were very cruel, but others were very kind. The treatment of the household slaves — or, as they are called in England, servants — differed very much from that of field slaves, the latter being for the most part under the control of the overseers, who were often very cruel to them. Yet there were exceptions, some being very kind."

Hardly a day passed without some one of my own long oppressed people being led to the whipping post, and there lashed most unmercifully. Every auction day many were sold away to Georgia, or some other of the far-off Southern States, and often could be seen in companies, handcuffed, and on their way to the Southern markets, doomed, doomed to perpetual slavery. So absolutely were the slaves in the power of their masters that they were pledged, leased, exchanged, taken for debt or gambled off at the gambling table; and men women, and children were sold by auction at the public auction block — husbands and wives separated, never to meet again, and little children torn from their parents' loving arms, and sold into slavery, and into the hands of strangers from distant parts.

In the midst of all their sufferings, the slaves would sing many of the religious songs that were sung by Jubilee Singers. And I often joined in the singing, When I resolved to "seek religion," I was then

nearly sixteen years of age. My master was a member of the Episcopalian Church, and would teach me to say my prayers, and the Apostles' Creed, and read to me about Abraham's servants and Isaac's servants, and Jacob's servants, and "servants, obey your masters." He would read these "wise" precepts over to me so carefully, have prayers, and then, when he felt like it (which he often did), gave me a lashing. And whenever he thought I ought to have a flogging, he would say to me: "Report yourself to me tomorrow morning after breakfast." If I did not report to get my flogging, I would have an extra lashing for that. Yet, with all this, my lot was much better than many of those around me. There was a man who owned the next plantation whose name was Jackson. He was so cruel to the slaves that he was known to them as "the devil." I remember well how I used to think of "seeking religion," but whenever I began to think seriously on this matter, a great obstacle confronted me. I was superstitious. Superstition is characteristic of the race in Africa. Having been brought to America, not permitted to be taught to read the Bible, and having every avenue to education closed against us, it was natural we should retain the superstitions of our fathers. My idea was that if I set out to "seek religion," I must meet with that old serpent, the devil. I often heard slaves say that when they set out to "seek religion," the devil set out with them, and this greatly perplexed me. Then I heard them talk of seeing ghosts. But after they were converted they would go six and ten miles at night to a meeting, and God would be with them. I resolved to set out definitely to get religion, with all my strange thoughts and fears. I thought the worst sin a man could be guilty of was murder. I knew I was innocent of that. One day, I was out gathering blackberries, and commenced to pray the Lord's Prayer; I knew not what else to say. As I prayed, a rabbit jumped up from under the bush from which I was gathering the berries. I felt sure this was the devil. I had heard that when he deceived Eve in the garden, he came like a serpent; and, furthermore, he could put himself into any shape. I was never more frightened in all my life. I was afraid to say my prayers at night, not so much because I might disturb the devil, but because he might disturb me. I wept bitterly in my loneliness and in my darkness of mind, having no father or mother to direct me.

About the year 1852 my master took to himself a wife, and then I was sold to his brother, who lived in Richmond, Virginia. Here I again met my dear mother, after having been separated from her for about

six years. This brother had always been kind to slaves, and every member of the family followed his example. How much he paid for me I never heard. His son once told me that he had been offered three thousand dollars in gold for me, but that he would not accept the amount. From this time I received better treatment. I was never flogged after coming into his hands. I was told that I was to be the property of his eldest son. He was much younger than myself. Now, during all this time I never lost sight of the lessons my dear mother had taught me, and while I was separated from her I worked hard in order to be able to make the letters of the Alphabet, and had learned to spell a large number of words. But I found out that the white people did not use the large letters of the Alphabet as I did when writing. I was strongly of the impression that an education consisted in knowing how to write, and I also knew that the slave-owners were opposed to their slaves acquiring even the most elementary literary knowledge. There was a slave on our lot named Anthony Burnes, who managed to get to Boston. Under the fugitive slave law he was brought back to Richmond, Virginia, and put into the slave pen for sale. Young Mr. Brent came to me one day when Burnes was in the trader's pen, and told me that Anthony was in gaol. He knew how to write, and had written himself a pass and had gone to the north, and that his master and other gentlemen had brought him back, and now he would be sold to Georgia. All this, said he, Burnes brought upon himself because he knew how to write. "Lor's o'er me," I said, "is dat so?" He answered very gravely, "Yes, that is so."

When I got by myself, I said, "If dat is so, I am going to learn how to write, and if I can get to Boston, I know I can get to Canada." With this resolve, I struggled hard to learn how to write. I began by pocketing the nice-looking letters I saw, and go to my room and try to make letters like them. I remember being in a church once, where I saw a lot of letters in a box. The writing looked so plain and nice, it seemed that I could not do better than take a few of the nicest looking ones to help me in my writing lessons. But this did not do, for although some of the letters were very nice, I did not know what to call them. The youngest son of the master had a copy book. When I saw it I decided to have one like it. The first time after this when I had five cents, I went to a book store and asked for a copy book. I had made up my mind what to say if the bookseller should ask me for whom I wanted it. I intended telling him that it was for my master. But

fortunately he did not question me in that direction. I told him in answer to his question as to what kind of copy book I wanted, to put them down that I might see them, and I would tell him. I went home and began to learn from this book how to write. The letters were alphabetically arranged. I got on very well, but another difficulty presented itself—I could not spell.

I purchased a spelling-book in the course of time, kept it in my pocket, and at every opportunity I looked into it. But there were so many words I could not understand. At night, when the young master would be getting his lessons, I used to choose some word I wanted to know how to spell, and say, “Master, I’ll bet you can’t spell ‘looking-glass.’” He would at once spell it. I would exclaim, “Lor’s o’er me, you can spell nice.” Then I would go out and spell the word over and over again. I knew that once it was in my head it would never be got out again. This young man was very kind, and was always willing to answer my questions. But sometimes he would ask why I wanted to know, and I would say, “I want to see how far you are.” In the course of time he would often read portions of his lessons to me. If I liked this and wanted to hear it again, I would say, “Lor’s o’er me, read that again,” which he often did. In this way each week I added a little to my small store of knowledge about the great world in which I lived.

But the door of freedom seemed as fast closed against me as ever. There was a large map of the United States hanging on the wall of the dining room, and each day as I attended to my duties I would stop a few minutes and look at the map. In the course of time I learned to spell the names of nearly all the cities along the railway route from Richmond to Boston, wondering whether I should ever see those cities where all were free. Never shall I be able to express my intense longing for freedom in those long, long days of slavery. During all this my heart was inclined towards “seeking religion.” Some of the slaves sang so much about “heaven” and “home,” and “rest” and “freedom,” and seemed so happy that I often longed to be able to join them. Many of the melodies were sung by the Jubilee Singers. “The home beyond,” where there was perfect rest and freedom and peace, and where there would be no slavery, was almost daily before me. But how to get religion was what perplexed me; yet it was essential to my happiness both here and hereafter. See how the heathen grope on in the darkness after God, and how on awakening turn towards Him. When, thirty-eight years afterwards, I went to Africa, I found that on comparison

the condition of the plantation negroes in America was but little better than that of the heathen in Africa. But “How shall they hear without a preacher?” Rom. x., 14. Dear Christian reader, will you not do something to send the Gospel to Africa—poor, long neglected Africa, the land of my fathers.

In the year 1857 there was a great revival in America. The coloured people thought the Judgment Day was coming. Everywhere heard of great meetings and of thousands of souls being converted. In the Richmond tobacco factories, which employed many thousands of slaves, there were many converts daily. First one and then another of my friends would set out to “seek religion.” At last I resolved that, should I live for a thousand years I would not stop seeking religion until I found the peace I needed; but the thought of meeting that old serpent, the devil, was chilling and repulsive to me. The converts used to relate their experience, and some of them said, as before mentioned, that when they set out to seek religion the devil set out with them; that while seeking they would “fast and pray”; and that the devil would do all he could to turn them back. This troubled me above all else. I thought the others had seen the devil with their natural eyes, and in this way I should have to see him. But I dreaded the encounter and feared to go to bed, and sat out in the porch at night, sometimes dozing a little, then awakening with fear, my thoughts being of that dreadful time through which I must go to get religion.

A rat suddenly scuttling across the floor would make me tremble, or a cat creeping along the wall toward me would send me into a paroxysm of fear that the moment had come. All the night I wished for the day, and yet when the day came I regretted the cowardice of the night. Matters came to such a pass that during the day I could scarcely speak to anyone; instead of being lively, and cheerful I was gloomy and nervous, and my master wanted to know what was wrong, and even threatened to send me to Georgia. But I had made up my mind that wherever I went I would not stop seeking religion until I found peace. I knew that God was stronger than the devil and my master, and so I made my request to God, “Please don’t let master sell me to Georgia.” Then I began to think that I must in some way renovate myself to be acceptable to God; that I must do something to make myself fit. I therefore fasted as long as I could, until I was obliged by hunger to take a hearty meal; but that meant the beginning of the fasting all over again, as I had turned back. Through losing rest night