

Chapter 1

Early Life

I was born a slave, and owned, with eighty-one others, by a man named Edloe, and among them all, only I learned to either read or write. When I was a child, my mother used to tell me to look to Jesus, and that He who protected the widow and fatherless would take care of me also. At that time, my ideas of Jesus were the same as those of the other slaves. I thought he would talk with me, if I wished it, and give me what I asked for. Being very sickly, my greatest wish was to live with Christ in heaven, and so I used to go into the woods and lie upon my back, and pray that he would come and take me to himself—really expecting to see Him with my bodily eyes. I was then between ten and eleven years old, and I continued to look for Him until I began to feel very sorry that He would not come and talk with me; and then I felt that I was the worst little boy that ever lived, and that was the reason Jesus would not talk to me. I felt so about it I wanted to die, and thought it would be just in God to kill me, and I prayed that he would kill me, for I did not want to live to sin against him any more. I felt so for many days and nights.

At last, I gave myself up to the Lord, to do what he would with me, for I was a great sinner. I began to see the offended justice of God. O, my readers, the anguish of my heart! I thought the whole world was on me, and I must die and be lost. In the midst of my troubles, I felt that if God would have mercy on me, I should never sin again. When I had come to this, I felt my guilt give way, and thought that I was a new being. Now, instead of looking with my real eyes to see my Saviour, I felt him in me, and I was happy. The eyes of my mind were open, and I saw things as I never did before. With my mind's eye, I could see my Redeemer hanging upon the cross for me.

I wanted all the other slaves to see him thus, and feel as happy as I did. I used to talk to others, and tell them of the friend they would have in Jesus, and show them by my experience how I was brought to Christ, and felt his love within my heart,—and love it was, in God's adapting himself to my capacity.

After receiving this revelation from the Lord, I became impressed that I was called of God to preach to the other slaves. I labored under this impression for seven years, but then I could not read the Bible, and I thought I could never preach unless I learned to read the Bible, but I had no one to teach me how to read. A friend showed me the letters, and how to spell words of three letters. Then I continued, until I got so as to read the Bible — the great book of God — the source of all knowledge. It was my great desire to read easily this book. I thought it was written by the Almighty himself. I loved this book, and prayed over it, and labored until I could read it. I used to go to the church to hear the white preacher. When I heard him read his text, I would read mine when I got home. This is the way, my readers, I learned to read the word of God when I was a slave. Thus did I labor eleven years under the impression that I was called to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, the ever-blessed God.

Then I learned to write. Here I had no teaching; but I obtained a book with the writing alphabet in it, and copied the letters until I could write. I had no slate, so I used to write on the ground. All by myself I learned the art of writing. Then I used to do my own letter-writing, and write my own passes. When the slave wants to go from one plantation to another, he must have a pass from the overseer. I could do my own writing, unbeknown to the overseer, and carry my own pass.

My oldest brother's name was Benjamin. He was owned by C. H. Edloe, the same person who owned me. Benjamin was a very bright young man, and very active about his work. He was fond of laughing and frolicking with the young women on the plantation. This, Lacy the overseer, did not like, and therefore was always watching Benjamin, seeking an occasion to have him whipped. At one time, a pig had been found dead. The little pig could not tell why he was dead, and no one confessed a knowledge of his death; consequently, Lacy thought so great a calamity, so important a death, should be revenged. He advised Edloe to have every slave whipped. Edloe consented, expecting, probably, to prevent by such cruelty, any other pig from dying a natural death.

Lacy, the tender-hearted overseer, with a heart overflowing with sorrow at the great loss and sad bereavement of Edloe's plantation, took his rawhide, with a wire attached to the end of it, and gave each man twenty lashes on the bare back. O, monster! the blood was seen

upon the side of the barn where these slaves were whipped for days and months. The wounds of these poor creatures prevented them from performing their daily tasks. They were, indeed, so cut up, that pieces came out of the backs of some of them, so that a child twelve or thirteen years old could lay his fist in the cruel place. My brother Benjamin was one of the slaves so savagely beaten.

One morning, Lacy — perhaps thinking piggy's death not wholly avenged—proposed again to whip my brother; but Benjamin did not agree with him as to the necessity of such proceedings, and determined not to submit; therefore, he turned his back upon Lacy, and his face to the woods, making all possible speed toward the latter. Lacy fired upon him, but only sent a few shot into his flesh, which did not in the least frighten Benjamin; it only served to make him run as fast as if he himself had been shot from the overseer's gun. For seven months, he lived in the swamps of Virginia, while every effort was made to catch him, but without success. He once ventured on board a vessel on the James River. There he was caught but soon made his escape again to the swamp, where my mother and myself used to carry him such food as we could procure to keep him alive. My poor broken-hearted mother was always weeping and praying about Benjamin, for the overseer had threatened that if he ever saw him, he would shoot him, as quick as he would a wild deer. All the other overseers had made the same threats.

Edloe, not thinking it best to take Benjamin on to his plantation (provided he could catch him), sold him to another man, who, after he had succeeded in his sham plan of buying my poor brother, sent for him to come out of the swamp and go with him. Benjamin went home to his new master, and went faithfully to work for him—smart young man that he was!

Sometimes Benjamin would steal over at night to see mother (a distance of ten miles). He could not come in the daytime, because Lacy still declared he would kill him the first time he saw him. He did see him one Sabbath, but having no gun or pistol with him, my brother again escaped him, thanks to the mercies of God.

Benjamin continued to serve his new master, until he was suddenly bound and carried to Petersburg, Virginia, and sold to a negro-trader who put him in a slave-pen, until a large number of slaves were bought up by him, to be carried into bondage further South, there to lead miserable lives on the cotton and sugar plantations.

Benjamin, my dear brother, left Petersburg, and I have not seen him since.

Thanks be unto God, prayer can ascend, and will be listened to by Him who answereth prayer! To him who crieth unto Him day and night, He will listen, and send His angel of peace to quiet his troubled heart, with the assurance that the down-trodden shall be lifted up, the oppressed shall be delivered from his oppressor, all captives set free, and all oppressors destroyed, as in ancient times. I know that God heard the prayers of my praying mother, because she was a Christian, and a widow, such as feared God and loved his commandments. She used often to sing the following hymn:

Our days began with trouble here,
Our lives are but a span,
White cruel death is always near—
What a feeble thing is man!
Then sow the seed of grace while young,
That when you come to die,
You may sing the triumphant song,
Death! where's thy victory?

With the above lines has my mother often soothed, for a time, her own sorrows, when she thought of her poor son, so far away from her, she knew not where, neither could she know of his sufferings; and again, she would become a prey to bitter grief. Her only hope was to meet her son in heaven, where slaveholders could not come with their purchase-money, where Lacy could not come with his dogs, his guns, or his pistols, with powder or balls; neither would she have to steal away to see him, with a little food well concealed. Neither will Benjamin be obliged to crouch in the forest, hearing the midnight cry of wild beasts around him, while he seeks repose upon the cold, bare ground. No, she will meet him at the right hand of the Redeemer, who will wipe the briny tears from the eyes of the poor slave, and feed him with the hidden treasures of His love.

My father did not belong to Edloe, but was owned by a Mr. George Harrison, whose plantation adjoined that of my master. Harrison made my father a slave-driver, placing an overseer over him. He was allowed to visit my mother every Wednesday and every Saturday night. This was the time usually given to the slaves to see their wives. My father

would often tell my mother how the white overseer had made him cruelly whip his fellows, until the blood ran down to the ground. All his days, he had to follow this dreadful employment of flogging men, women and children, being placed in this helpless condition by the tyranny of his master. I used to think very hard of my father, and that he was a very cruel man; but when I knew that he could not help himself, I could not but alter my views and feelings in regard to his conduct. I was ten years old when he died.

When my father died, he left my mother with five children. We were all young at the time, and mother had no one to help take care of us. Her lot was very hard indeed. She had to work all the day for her owner, and at night for those who were dearer to her than life; for what was allowed her by Edloe was not sufficient for our wants. She used to get a little corn, without his knowledge, and boil it for us to satisfy our hunger. As for clothing, Edloe would give us a coarse suit once in three years; mother sometimes would beg the cast-off garments from the neighbors, to cover our nakedness; and when they had none to give, she would sit and cry over us, and pray to the God of the widow and fatherless for help and succor. At last, my oldest brother was sold from her, and carried where she never saw him again. She went mourning for him all her days, like a bird robbed of her young—like Rachel bereft of her children, who would not be comforted, because they were not. She departed this life on the 27th of September, 1847, for that world “where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest.”

Chapter 2

Freedom

Carter H. Edloe made his Will six years before his decease. He said to some of his slaves, just before his death, that he had another Will, which he had given into the bands of a lawyer in Petersburg, Va., to keep for him, but this Will was never heard from. The slaves knew about it, but their voice or testimony was nothing; therefore, nothing could be done about it.

I present that Will here, together with the decree of the Court respecting it, in order that my readers may judge for themselves as to the intention of our master, and be convinced that what I have to say in reference to the manner in which the Will was executed is perfectly just, and warranted by the facts.

In the Name of God, Amen!—

I, CARTER H. EDLOE, of the County of Prince George, being of sound mind and disposing memory, but considering the uncertainty of life, do make and ordain this to be my last Will and Testament:

1st. I desire that all debts that I may owe at the time of my decease, shall be paid out of the money on hand or the profits of my estate.

2nd. I desire that my estate shall be kept together and cultivated to the best advantage, until a sufficient sum can be raised to pay my debts, should there be any deficiency in the amount of money on hand and debts due to me, and to raise a sufficient sum to pay for the transportation of my Slaves to any Free State or Colony which they may prefer, and give to each Slave Fifty Dollars on their departure, either in money or other articles which may suit them better; but should any of my slaves prefer going immediately, they can do so, but they are not to be furnished with money. It is not my wish to force them away without their consent. In the event of any of them preferring to remain in slavery, they must take the disposition hereinafter directed.

3rd. After the provisions in the preceding clauses of my Will have been complied with, I loan to my niece, Elizabeth C. Orgain, my plantation in Prince George, called Mt. Pleasant, during her life, but in the event of her

marrying and having children, I then give to her children, at her death, the said land, to them and their heirs forever.

4th. I loan to my niece, Mary Orgain, my Plantation in Prince George, called Brandon and Dandridge's, during her life; but should she marry and have children, I then give to her children, at her death, the said lands, to them and their heirs forever.

5th. The rest and residue of my estate, of whatever kind soever, I desire may be divided into two equal parts, and one part to go to each of my nieces, Elizabeth and Mary; and should any of my slaves prefer remaining in slavery, I desire they may be divided into two equal parts, and one part go to each of my nieces, during their lives, and then to their children, in the same manner as the landed property is given, except my Household Furniture, Wines and Liquors, all of which I give to Mary Orgain during her life and then to her children. Those negroes under age at my death may have until they are twenty-one years of age to decide whether they will go or remain; but in the event of but one of my nieces having children, I desire that those children have the whole of my property at the death of their aunt.

6th. I give and bequeath to my female slave, Harriet Barber, and her children (all of whom I bought of R. G. Orgain, Esq.), Eight Thousand Dollars, which sum I desire my Executors to take from my estate, and either lay it out in good stock, or put the money out at interest, always taking undoubted security—the stock I should prefer—the interest of which shall be paid to said Harriet yearly. Should there not be a sum sufficient to pay this legacy, either in stock or money, I direct my Executors to sell my land in Southampton. Should that not make up the deficiency, other land must be sold, or horses and cattle, as my Executors may think best.

7th. It is my wish that the said Harriet and children should remain on my estate, or in any situation which they may prefer that the law will allow; and I direct my Executors to furnish Harriet and her children with their Free Papers, whenever they may desire to have them, and assist them to remove to any place they may choose to locate themselves.

I do hereby appoint David D. Brydon, of the Town of Petersburg, and John A. Seldon, of Charles City County, my Executors, requiring them to give no security for the performance of their duty. I do hereby revoke all former Wills, this being my last Will. In testimony whereof, I have hereunto subscribed my name, this 20th day of March, One Thousand Eight Hundred and Thirty-Eight.

CARTER H. EDLOE.