

CHAPTER


**A SLAVE
AMONG SLAVES**

I was born a slave on a plantation, owned by James Burroughs, in Franklin County, Virginia. I do not know the exact place or date of my birth, but the time was spring 1856.

My earliest memories are of the plantation and its slave quarters, where the slaves had their cabins. Compared to other slave owners, the Burroughses were not especially cruel, but my life began in miserable surroundings. I was born in a typical log cabin about sixteen feet long and fourteen feet wide. I lived there with my mother, Jane; my brother, John, who is several years older than I am; and my half-sister, Amanda.

I know almost nothing about my ancestry. In the days of slavery, blacks' family histories received little attention. The purchase of a slave was noted in the same way as the

purchase of a horse or cow.

In the slave quarters I heard whispered conversations about the tortures that slaves suffered on the ships that brought them from Africa to America. At least one of my maternal ancestors was among those slaves. As for my father—I don't even know his name. I have heard that he was a white man who lived on a nearby plantation. Whoever he was, he apparently never took the least interest in me or provided in any way for my upbringing.

The one-room cabin in which my family lived was not only our home but also the plantation's kitchen. My mother was the plantation's cook. The cabin had no glass windows, only side openings that let in light as well as winter's cold air. The cabin's door had large cracks, hung poorly on its hinges, and was too small for its opening.

In the cabin's lower right corner was a cat hole, something that almost every pre-Civil War mansion or cabin in Virginia possessed. The cat hole was a square opening, about seven by eight inches, that allowed cats to go in and out during the night. I never could understand why *our* cabin needed a cat hole: at least a half-dozen other openings in the cabin would have accommodated the cats.

Our cabin's floor was bare earth. In the

center of the floor was a large, deep opening covered with boards. During the winter, we stored sweet potatoes in this hole. While putting potatoes into this hole, or taking them out, I often would come into possession of one or two, which I roasted and thoroughly enjoyed.

Our plantation had no stove. My mother had to do all the cooking for the whites and slaves at the fireplace, mostly in pots and pans. Just as the cabin's poor construction caused us to suffer from cold in the winter, the fireplace caused us to suffer from heat in the summer.

My life's early years, which were spent in the little cabin, were not very different from those of thousands of other slaves. During the day, my mother could devote little time to her children. She would snatch a few moments for our care in the early morning before her work began and at night after her work was done.

One of my earliest memories is of my mother cooking a chicken late at night and awakening John, Amanda, and me so that we could eat it. I don't know how or where she got the chicken. I assume it came from the Burroughses' farm.

I can't remember a single time during my childhood that my entire family sat down to a

table together and ate a meal in a civilized way. On the plantation the children got their meals very much as animals get theirs. We got a piece of bread here and a scrap of meat there, a cup of milk at one time and some potatoes at another. Sometimes members of our family would eat from the pot or frying pan while someone else ate from a tin plate held on their knees. Often we held our food with nothing but our hands.

Once a week I got to eat molasses. Our usual diet was cornbread and pork, but on Sunday morning my mother was permitted to bring down a little molasses from the “big house” (as the master’s house was called) for John, Amanda, and me. I would get my tin plate and hold it up for the sweet morsel—about two tablespoons. I always shut my eyes while the molasses was being poured into the plate, in the hope that when I opened them, I’d be surprised to see how much I had gotten. When I opened my eyes, I’d tip the plate in one direction after another, to make the molasses spread all over it. I believed that there would be more molasses and it would last longer if it was spread out.

Once, I saw two of my young mistresses and some lady visitors eating ginger cakes in the yard. I felt that, if I ever was free, I would

reach the height of my ambition if I obtained and ate ginger cakes.

My first pair of shoes had rough leather on top; the soles, about an inch thick, were wooden. When I walked, the shoes made considerable noise. They were uncomfortable because they didn't conform to the foot's shape or pressure.

However, wearing a flaxen shirt was a worse ordeal. In the part of Virginia where I lived, flax commonly was used in slave clothing—the cheapest and roughest flax. Putting on a new flaxen shirt was almost like having dozens of chestnut burrs against my skin, which was soft and tender. Several times that I was given a new flaxen shirt, John generously wore it for several days, to break it in, before I started to wear it. Until I was quite a youth, a flaxen shirt was the only garment that I wore.

John, Amanda, and I had no bed. We slept in and on a bundle of filthy rags laid on the dirt floor.

Nor did we have any playtime. Most of my time was spent cleaning the yards, carrying water to the men in the fields, or (once a week) bringing corn to the mill, for grinding.

I always dreaded bringing corn to the mill, which was about three miles from the

plantation. The heavy bag of corn would be thrown across a horse's back, with about half of the corn on the horse's right and about half on the left. On almost every trip the corn would shift so that it became unbalanced. It would fall off the horse, and often I'd fall with it. Because I wasn't strong enough to reload the corn onto the horse, I'd have to wait, sometimes for hours, until some passerby came along who would help me. I usually spent the hours of waiting crying. The wait made me late in reaching the mill. By the time I got the corn ground and returned home, it was far into the night. The road was lonely and often led through dense forests. I always was frightened. The woods were said to be full of deserters from the Confederate army. I was told that a deserter would cut off the ears of any black boy whom he found alone. Whenever I got home late, I was scolded or flogged.

I had no schooling. Several times I carried the books of one of my young mistresses as far as the schoolhouse door. Seeing several dozen boys and girls engaged in study made a deep impression on me. I felt that getting into a schoolhouse and studying in this way must be like getting into Heaven.

I learned that I was a slave, and that

emancipation was being discussed, one morning before dawn. I was awakened by my mother kneeling over John, Amanda, and me and fervently praying that Abraham Lincoln and his armies would succeed and that she and her children would be freed.

From the time that William Lloyd Garrison, Elijah Lovejoy, and others began to agitate for freedom, slaves throughout the South kept in close touch with the progress of the anti-slavery movement. My mother and other slaves on the Burroughs plantation had many whispered late-night discussions. They understood the situation and kept themselves informed of events through the “grapevine.”

When Lincoln was first campaigning to be President, the slaves on our plantation—miles from any railroad, large city, or daily newspaper—knew what issues were involved. When the Civil War began, even the most ignorant slaves on remote plantations felt certain that if the Northern armies prevailed, slavery would end.

Every Union victory and every Confederate defeat was a subject of intense interest. On our plantation this news usually came from the slave who was sent to the post office, about three miles away, for the mail, which came once or twice a week. After getting their

mail, whites would congregate at the post office to discuss the latest news. The slave who was sent to the post office would linger long enough to get the drift of their conversation. On his way back, he would share the news with other slaves. In this way slaves often heard of important events before their owners did.

When I became big enough, I was required to go to the “big house” at meal-times, to fan the flies from the table by means of a large set of pulley-operated paper fans. Much of the white people’s conversation focused on the war and the end of slavery, and I absorbed much of it.

As the war continued, whites often found it difficult to get the food that they wanted. The usual slave diet of cornbread and pork could be obtained on the plantation, but coffee, tea, sugar, and other items to which the whites were accustomed frequently could not. The whites often used parched corn in place of coffee, and black molasses in place of sugar. Often they didn’t use anything to sweeten their tea and so-called coffee.

During the war one of my young masters was killed, and two were severely wounded. The slaves on our plantation felt genuine sorrow when they heard that “Mas’er Billy”

was dead. Some of the slaves had nursed him; others had played with him when he was a child; still others had known him to beg for mercy when they were being thrashed by James Burroughs or the overseer. When the two young masters were brought home wounded, some slaves begged to sit up at night to nurse them.

While the white males were off fighting in the war, many slaves would have died to protect the white women and children on the plantations. The slave who was selected to sleep in the “big house” during the absence of the white males was considered to have the place of honor. Anyone attempting to harm “young Mistress” or “old Mistress” during the night would have had to cross the slave’s dead body to do so.

I know of blacks who have tenderly cared for former masters and mistresses who became dependent after the war; blacks who have given their former owners money, to keep them from suffering; and blacks who have assisted in the education of their former owners’ descendants. On one large Southern plantation, a young white man, the son of the estate’s former owner, has become poor and a drunkard. Notwithstanding their own poverty, the blacks on this plantation have, for years,

supplied him with life's necessities. One sends him a little coffee or sugar, another a little meat, and so on.

The whole machinery of slavery discouraged white self-reliance. It made labor a badge of degradation and inferiority. To my knowledge, not one of James Burroughs's many children ever mastered a single trade or craft. In general, slave owners and their children learned no skills or trades. From cooking and sewing to carpentry and farming, manual labor was left to slaves. When freedom came, many former slaves were almost as well prepared to begin life anew as their former masters, except with regard to literacy and ownership of property.

Fearful of "Yankee" invasions, whites had their silverware and other valuables taken from the "big house," buried in the woods, and guarded by trusted slaves. The slaves would give Yankee soldiers food, drink, clothing, anything except something specifically entrusted to their care.

Not long ago in a small Ohio town, I met a former slave from Virginia who exemplified many slaves' sense of honor. Two or three years before the Emancipation Proclamation, this man and his master made a contract to the effect that he would be permitted to buy

himself by paying a certain amount each year. Meanwhile, he would be permitted to labor where and for whom he chose. Finding that he could get better wages in Ohio, he went there. When freedom came, he still owed his former master about \$300, according to their contract. Although the Emancipation Proclamation had freed him from any obligation to his former master, this man walked most of the way back to where his former master lived in Virginia and placed the last dollar, with interest, in his hands. The man told me that he knew that he needn't pay the debt but that he never broke his word.

For months, freedom's approach was in the air. Every day, we saw army deserters returning to their homes. Others who had been discharged, or whose regiments had been paroled, continually passed by. News of great events swiftly traveled from one plantation to another.

As freedom neared, the singing in the slave quarters became bolder, had more ring, and lasted later into the night. Most verses of the plantation songs contained some reference to freedom. The slaves had sung those same verses before but had been careful to say that "freedom" referred to the next world. Now they let it be known that the "freedom"

in their songs meant freedom in *this* world.

Finally the war ended. One night in 1865, word was sent to the slave quarters that something unusual was going to take place at the “big house” the next morning. There was little, if any, sleep that night. All was excitement and expectation.

Early the next morning all the slaves gathered at the house. All members of the Burroughs family were standing or sitting on the veranda. Their faces had a look of deep interest, perhaps sadness.

A stranger (probably a U.S. officer) made a short speech and then read a rather long paper: the Emancipation Proclamation, I think. After the reading we all were told that we were free. We could go when and where we pleased. I was nine years old.

My mother, who was standing by my side, leaned over and kissed John, Amanda, and me. Tears of joy ran down her cheeks. She explained to us what it all meant. She said that this was the day for which she had prayed—the day that she had feared she never would live to see.

For some minutes there was great rejoicing and thanksgiving. But by the time the blacks returned to their cabins, they were more subdued. The great responsibility of

being free, of having to think and plan for themselves and their children, took hold of them. They were like youths of ten or twelve turned out into the world to provide for themselves. Is it any wonder that within a few hours, gloom seemed to pervade the slave quarters?

Some of the slaves were seventy or eighty years old; their best days were gone. They had no strength with which to earn a living in a strange place and among strangers, even if they had known where to find a new home. Also, they felt an attachment to "old Mas'er," "old Missus," and their children that they found hard to break. In some cases, they had spent nearly half a century with the Burroughses. One by one, stealthily at first, the older slaves began to wander from the slave quarters back to the "big house" to have a whispered conversation with the Burroughses as to the future.