

RECOLLECTIONS OF SLAVE DAYS.

BY MAJ. S. H. M. BYERS.

The winter immediately preceding the great civil war found my father and myself on the cotton plantation of Mr. T., in Mississippi. My father in those days was engaged in selling Iowa horses south, and to save the expense of wintering them in cities, it was his custom to drive them to some plantation in the interior. On this particular trip south, I, a lad of twenty, was permitted to go along. I still recall with a smile the evening we reached Mr. T.'s farm. The overseer of the plantation, with a half dozen of his slaves, came out to the roadside to assist us in putting away the horses for the night. To each one of these assisting darkies my father gave a small coin. His generosity was soon noised about among the fifty or more men and boys of the plantation. Colored folks had not been much accustomed to getting "tips" from anybody. The evening was chilly, and shortly we white folks were sitting before a big blazing fire in the overseer's house. Supper had not been announced before a couple of black boys came into the room grinning and with cap in hand. "Massa," said they, "we'uns, too, jest helped with the horses." As the black boys all looked about alike in the uncertain light from the fire-place, my father handed them also a few pennies. But that moment other grinning faces appeared from the shadows at the back end of the room. "We'uns too," said their speaker. "We'uns, too, took care of the horses, massa," and a half dozen of ragged caps and grinning faces came into the fire-light at once. They got their coins, and others came, and others, until it seemed there had been five times as many darkies helping us as we had horses. We all laughed; even the overseer. When the small change gave out they all good naturedly went out upon the grass in front of the house and serenaded us with old plantation songs. That was my first experience with slave-

ry. What a contented, happy lot of people, I thought to myself. Their songs were filled with pathos. Their voices were mellow, and low and sweet. I have never had such delight with music, never, not even with the stars of grand opera, as I experienced that night with these simple slaves singing on the lone plantation in the back woods of Mississippi. There was a feeling of sincerity, almost a sorrow, that other music never yet produced. It was the song of slaves, touchingly happy even in bondage. Shortly the lights were out in all the slaves' cabins, and, saving the flickering flames from the fire-place, the lights too were extinguished in the house of the overseer, and slave man and free man slept alike in the starlight, and neither knew whether the roof above him was of gold or straw.

The owner of this big cotton farm spent his winters in Europe, or in some Southern city, and the control of his hundred and fifty human chattels, like the control of his horses and pigs, was left to his hired overseer. How good, how humane a man this owner of human flesh might have been, I had no means of finding out. His overseer looked upon these unfortunate men and women as exactly in the same category with the animals on the farm. Could he abuse, starve or whip a horse, so could he abuse, starve or whip a slave—and who dared report to the master when he came? Only God's eye saw what happened on many a plantation in the South—and it was all happening under the then so-called "flag of freedom." The farce was too awful to continue forever. The explosion of Almighty wrath was coming on. The overseer of the plantation of Mr. T. would not have dared treat my father's horses in the manner he sometimes treated the master's slaves. And yet he regarded himself as one of the milder, kinder men who had charge of other people's "niggers." Among his slaves he had a big black ruffian whose office seemed to be chief whipper for the plantation. Licking "niggers" was after all too hard work for the overseer. "Give that nigger a licking," was a common speech to hear from the overseer when the black folks came in from the fields evenings, when some luckless fellow had not done his

allotted work. Then the big, hard-faced man would lash his fellow-creature, man or woman, with a relish that seemed absolutely astounding. "There is no use treating niggers roughly," the overseer would sometimes say to my father, as we sat around the evening fire. "These people all know I'm master here, and that's enough." My father usually made no answer but looked straight into the fire. He was an abolitionist; he held his peace; but he lived to see the day when even the memory of a plantation overseer could excite anger in the human breast. Around the fireside on that plantation, during those winter nights, the American stars and stripes seemed to be a disgusting mockery. Northerner and Southerner alike were pretending to a monstrous lie.

Spite of the slave surroundings the stay on the plantation was interesting in the extreme. Everything seemed so different to me from farm-life in the North. Slavery changed everything. With military precision a great horn was blown every morning before daylight, when all the negroes in the long rows of cabins got up and prepared their breakfasts of hoe-cake and bacon, and then sweet potatoes were roasted for midday lunch in the field. When the day broke, squads were formed of men, women and children, and the procession started to the fields to labor till evening twilight. An immense field was being cleared of the dead trees and logs and stumps, and forty or fifty men chopped till nightfall. Sometimes I noticed whole groups of them chopping together, keeping rude time with their axes to some plantation melody.

Way down there, what you doing?

Slow, low, way down there:

Don't you know the Lord an coming.

Way down there:

Go slow, go slow, very slow,

Away down there.

The overseer, his wife, my father and myself were the only white people on the plantation that winter. It was six miles to the nearest hamlet, and the overseer was the absolute master of the whole black colony. There was no law there but his will. Body and soul, the slaves were as help-

less from his temper or his wrong-doing, as dumb animals. The race of black people grown up since the war have absolutely no realization of the servitude in which their fathers and mothers groaned.

Around the big blazing fire at night the overseer was by no means a bad man. He had his grog, and his tales of southern duels, and of the overflowings of the big rivers; and we, in our turn, told him of the big prairies of the far west, the Indians, and tales of immigrant trains to California.

The absent owner of the plantation "chattels" was also part owner of a fashionable livery and sale stable in Memphis, and it was there my father had arranged to exhibit and sell his Iowa horses. The co-partner and manager of the establishment was a Mr. M. Occasionally, some of the negroes from the farm were brought in to the city and put to work in the stables. Frank and Bill, and Uncle Alfred, and Sam, and Jane. How their names come back to me after all the changing years! I, too, labored about the stables, either to help care for my father's horses, or to ride them up and down the street to show them off to purchasers, while Mr. M. in his loose, green plaid trousers stood like a cigar sign at the doorway. His appearance as he stood there will never be effaced from my memory. With his broad-brimmed silk hat, his plaid pantaloons, with their great green checks, strapped under his boots, his buff vest, his cane, his white, dainty hands, his absolute elegance and idleness. He regarded himself as the best-looking man in Memphis. I never saw him do a stroke of work—unless when in a sudden fit of anger he walked to the back end of the barn, took down a harness strap, and "licked a nigger." Like the overseer out on the farm, however, he did not like to "treat his slaves too roughly." A terrible cow-hiding on the naked back, now and then, was not so much a punishment in his mind as a warning. "Of course the d—d niggers must not forget who's who," he would sometimes say to us. "You don't know anything about a nigger up North, you folks don't"—he would exclaim to my father.

One day he called the big boy, Bill, into the office. "Bill, why in h—ll don't you marry Jane? Go along now! We want more little niggers around here—stock's running low." "Why, land sakes, Massa, that yellow gal jes wouldn't think of marrying me! She wouldn't look at this nigger, she wouldn't." "Well, now you just walk in there and tell her you are going to marry her. I'll 'tend to the rest." In two weeks there was a big colored wedding in the basement of the Methodist church. Jane figured as bride—in white lawn dress and abundance of fine ribbons. Bill had done as was told him—he led Jane to the altar, and the ribbons and the dress and the cake were all furnished by the man in the green-checked trousers. A week afterwards Bill had neglected to wash a carriage properly. He was not the most "likely of niggers," anyway. "Bill," says Mr. M., "take this note down to the keeper of the lockup." With depressed countenance the slave took the note. I followed to see what would happen. "Yes, I see," said the keeper of the lockup, as he read the note. "What you been doing again, Bill?" "Why, jes nothing, Massa, 'pon my word." "All right, Bill, take off your shirt and lie down there on the floor." The slave did as he was bidden, and lay down on the wet stone floor of the jail corridor, when the hired brute gave him one hundred lashes on his naked back with a cow-hide! Screams, and piteous prayers, and cries that might have moved a stone to mercy, fell on heedless ears. A bucket of salt brine was thrown over the slave's lacerated back, and he was told to dress himself and go home to his master. I too went home, wondering that the Almighty permitted such men to live an hour! I soon learned that this was the elegant Mr. M.'s way of getting his slaves punished. He simply sent a note to some brute of a whipper. "Give this man a hundred lashes. Charge to account." Sometimes, however, Mr. M. suddenly flew into a rage. There was no sending polite notes then. The nearest rope, strap or club, settled the business. Only good, saintly, old white-haired Alfred seemed excepted from all cursings, beatings and abuse. He was so faithful and true. He had been in the M. family

fifty years, possibly had carried M. to school as a little boy. Now he was the faithful, loved, old slave and a leader in the colored church and Sunday school. What was my astonishment one afternoon to hear the gentleman in green checked pantaloons cry out to old white-haired Alfred: "Come here, you cussed nigger." Alfred had neglected some trifling duty. "Take off your shirt, lean over that bale of hay," shouted the enraged master as he snatched a harness tug from the wall and mercilessly lashed the old man, the great welts on his naked back showing at every stroke. Poor Alfred cried and prayed—"Oh! Master M.! don't kill me, for God's sake, don't kill me—please don't kill me! I'll serve you and pray for you, master, as long as I live—don't kill me." The blows rained on until master and slave were exhausted; and no avenging angel struck the monster dead! That night my father told Mr. M. that we were going North. He could stand such sights no longer. "Well, what kind of people are you, up there in Iowa, anyway?" sneered the enraged man. "You don't know what niggers are—and if I could not stand to see a nigger licked, I'd go North, too!"

We returned home, leaving the few unsold horses in the hands of an agent.

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In a year the frightful war broke out. Instantly, I was a volunteer in the ranks of the Union Army. My winter South helped me in my resolution. The scenes in M.'s barn were burned into my mind forever. With varying vicissitudes the strife went on. Battles were lost, battles were gained. One day the river gun-boats, with the aid of some of our troops, took Memphis. Unexpectedly my regiment was ordered to go and camp in the suburbs of the city. That very day with a small squad of mounted men I hurried into the town and to the street where the fashionable barn was. Mr. M. still stood there in the door way in his green-checked trousers. Had he been standing there a year? "Who are you?" he asked, as I rode up past him and into his barn. "I am Sergt. B.," I answered, "of the 5th Iowa.

You once wanted to know what kind of people lived up in Iowa. I have brought some of them with me, here," I added. He sneered—"So you've come to steal my horses and burn my barn then, I suppose?" "Oh no, not so bad as that," I answered. "We'll just take some of the horses and the harness." The men with me commenced backing the animals out of the stable. That moment I heard voices at the back end of the barn. "Lor! Lor! Look—if there aint young Mr. B.," shouted a dozen voices at once—and Frank and Jim and Bill and Jane and white-haired Alfred crowded about me, trying to get my hand or even to touch my horse's neck. The master stood there in sullen silence.

Lincoln's proclamation freeing the slaves had not been issued yet—but some of our soldiers had taken such matters into their own hands. "Boys," I said, "my regiment is out by the Brick Hospital—you know the way—go, all of you!" Without a word or a farewell to their master, fifteen slaves entered the sunlight of freedom. Some of them followed our command as servants and camp cooks for many months. Jane is today somewhere in Iowa, *free*. Old Alfred is doubtless dead. Mr. M. with the green plaid trousers, no longer stands in front of his doorway—for reckless soldiers later on burned his establishment to the ground. There was not much to burn, only some brick walls and some carriages without horses.

KEOKUK'S VISIT TO NAUVOO.—We understand that one day last week, they had quite a pageant at Nauvoo. The Indian Chief Keokuk, with about fifty of his followers, warriors, squaws and papposes, took occasion to pay a special visit to their brother, [Joseph Smith], the Revelator and Prophet—to smoke the pipe of peace with him in his wik-ke-up, and discourse on the wonders of the New Jerusalem. "As to the New Jerusalem, to which they were all going to emigrate, so far as he was concerned, it depended very much whether there would be any government annuities—and as for the 'milk and honey' which was to flow over the land, he was not particular—he should prefer whiskey." —*Fort Madison Courier*, Sept. 4, 1841.

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