

Resource Sheet #5

Autobiography of a Female Slave

Martha Griffith Browne, d. 1906

My mother was a very bright mulatto woman, and my father, I suppose, was a white man, though I know nothing of him; for, with the most unpaternal feeling, he deserted me. A consequence of this amalgamation was my very fair and beautiful complexion. My skin was no perceptible shade darker than that of my young mistresses. My eyes were large and dark, while a profusion of nut-brown hair, straight and soft as the whitest lady's in the land, fell in showery redundance over my neck and shoulders. I was often mistaken for a white child; and in my rambles through the woods, many caresses have I received from wayside travellers; and the exclamation, "What a beautiful child!" was quite common. Owing to this personal beauty I was a great pet with my master's sister, Mrs. Woodbridge, who, I believe I have stated, was a widow, and childless; so upon me she lavished all the fondness of a warm and loving heart.

A tall, hard-looking man came up to me, very roughly seized my arm, bade me open my mouth; examined my teeth; felt of my limbs; made me run a few yards; ordered me to jump; and, being well satisfied with my activity, said to Master Edward, "I will take her." Little comprehending the full meaning of that brief sentence, I rejoined the group of children from which I had been summoned. After awhile, my mother came up to me, holding a wallet in her hand. The tear-drops stood on her cheeks, and her whole frame was distorted with pain. She walked toward me a few steps, then stopped, and suddenly shaking her head, exclaimed, "No, no, I can't do it, I can't do it." I was amazed at her grief, but an indefinable fear kept me from rushing to her.

"Here, Kitty," she said to an old negro woman, who stood near, "you break it to her. I can't do it. No, it will drive me mad. Oh, heaven! that I was ever born to see this day." Then rocking her body back and forward in a transport of agony, she gave full vent to her feelings in a long, loud, piteous wail. Oh, God! that cry of grief, that knell of a breaking heart, rang in my ears for many long and painful days. At length Aunt Kitty approached me, and, laying her hand on my shoulder, kindly said:

"Alas, poor chile, you mus' place your trus' in the good God above, you mus' look to Him for help; you are gwine to leave your mother now. You are to have a new home, a new master, and I hope new friends. May the Lord be with you." So saying, she broke suddenly away from me; but I saw that her wrinkled face was wet with tears.

With perhaps an idle, listless air, I received this astounding news; but a whirlwind was gathering in my breast. What could she mean by new friends and a new home? Surely I was to take my mother with me! No mortal power would dare to sever *us*. Why, I remember that when master sold the gray mare, the colt went also. Who could, who would, who dared, separate the parent from her offspring? Alas! I had yet to learn that the white man dared do all that his avarice might suggest; and there was no human tribunal where the outcast African could pray for "right!" Ah, when I now think of my poor mother's form, as it swayed like a willow in the tempest of grief; when I remember her bitter cries, and see her arms thrown frantically toward me, and hear her earnest--oh, how earnest--prayer for death or madness, then I wonder where were Heaven's thunderbolts; but retributive Justice *will* come sooner or later, and He who remembers mercy *now* will not forget justice *then*.

"Come along, gal, come along, gather up your duds, and come with me," said a harsh voice; and, looking up from my bewildered reverie, I beheld the man who had so carefully examined me. I was too much startled to fully understand the words, and stood vacantly gazing at him. This strange manner he construed into disrespect; and, raising his riding-whip, he brought it down with considerable force upon my back. It was the first lash I had ever given to me in anger. I smarted beneath the stripe, and a cry of pain broke from my lips. Mother sprang to me, and clasping my quivering form in her arms, cried out to my young master, "Oh, Master Eddy, have mercy on me, on my child. I have served you faithfully, I nursed you, I grew up with your poor mother, who now sleeps in the cold ground, I beg you now to save *my child*," and she sank down at his feet, whilst her tears fell fast.

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