

Excerpt from “*The North Star*” 1856

Published by: Frederick Douglass

Mrs. Weems had a brother, whom we shall call Brown, who with his wife belonged to the same man. In 1849 or '50, Brown and wife with Mary Jane (or Stella as she has been called) the eldest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Weems made their escape. They first went to the city of New York and finally settled in Geneva, N.Y.. Rev. Henry B. Garnett, then the pastor of the colored church in that village became acquainted with them, and took Stella into his family. Soon after, Mr. Garnett went to Scotland, where he had been invited to deliver a course of lectures. Subsequently, he sent for his family and Stella accompanied them as a companion for Mrs. Garnett. She afterwards went with to Jamaica, W.I., where they now reside.

When the *Fugitive Slave Bill* was passed in 1850, Mr. and Mrs. Brown, in common with a large number of free people of color at the North were alarmed for their safety and felt obligated to flee into Canada. Here their wanderings ended: they now had an asylum, where the oppressor could not reach them. Being industrious and energetic, they soon succeeded in securing the necessaries and comforts of life in their new home. Still they were in a strange land: the “sunny south” looked far pleasanter to them than the cold and dreary region where their lot was now cast. Nothing but the dread of slavery could reconcile them to the change. They felt very keenly and separation from all their relatives and friends---and it was not the separation only, but the dreadful knowledge---ever before their minds---that most of these beloved friends were in cruel bondage. They knew how to feel for them, as only those can who have themselves been slaves. They could remember them who are in bonds, as bound with them.

They longed to hear that some of these dear friends had escaped. How gladly would they welcome them to a share in their humble home, and in the fruits of their industry. They sent once and again, as earnest that Ann Maria Weems' youngest daughter, might be brought to them. When they heard that their old master was dead, they trembled as well they might, for their sister and her children.--- They knew, that notwithstanding the husband and father was a free man, his wife and children would now be taken from him, divided amongst the heirs, and probably dispersed to distant places.

Leaving these affectionate relatives to weep and pray over the perils of those so dear to them, we will now return to Maryland, and imagine, if we can, the feelings of John Weems in the immediate prospect of having his whole family taken away from him, separated from one another and dispersed around the heirs of their master. O, reader, make it your own case! You are the father, or the mother, or the member of a family, which has always been united and happy. None of you have committed anything worthy of bonds or imprisonment; yet, all at once, words comes that you are to be separated, and scattered widely perhaps, where you may never see each

other again! How would you feel? It is only by thus making the case of your own, that you can feel for them as you ought.

Perhaps you will say, “slaves cannot be supposed to feel these separation so keenly as we should, for it is what they always expect will happen sooner or later.” They do, indeed, expect this, and that portion of their lives, which might be comparatively happy, is constantly embittered by the thought, that, at the decease of their master, or in case of his becoming involved in debt, they will be sold and separated. In many cases, they have kind masters, and (with the slight exception of being deprived of liberty and knowledge,) are treated comparatively well, and are comparatively happy; yet there is always this *terrible liability* hanging over their heads. But would the fact of our having *expected* such a calamity, do much to lessen its weight when it came?

Some people shut up their compassion for their fellow men in bondage, thinking, as (_?_) of his wife and youngest child. The slave trader (_?_) to take \$500 for them. Weems then went a second time to New York to endeavour to raise the money; having received a permit from the authorities in Rockville allowing them to return, if not absent beyond thirty days. The laws of Maryland do not suffer a free colored man to go away and return without a permit.

Not finding the friend in New York, from whom he expected advise and assistance, he proceeded to Boston in quest of him. His friend was not there either, and he returned to New York. But Providence raised up another friend: Rev. Charles B. Ray, a coloured preacher of New York, who did him good service. He told him of Mr. Garnett’s popularity in Scotland, and that he probably could raise money there for him and he offered to write Mr. Garnett a statement of the case. He then advised Weems to go back to Maryland and get his permit renewal, and return to New York. Mr. Rev. wrote to Mr. Garnett, and laid this truly interesting case fully before him.

Weems returned to Washington, and arrived just in time to take leave of his wife and children! They were about to go from the slave pen, with a gang of slaves, to the southern market. He begged the slave trader to leave his wife and youngest child, and give an opportunity to raise the money for their reunion, but in vain. After all his efforts, he must see him go. With a breaking heart he bids them farewell, enjoying upon his wife, in their last interview, that if take to a distance, she will make the place of slavery known to him---. He returns to his house, now left unto him desolate! What had this man done, that he should be separated from his wife and children? Here was a peaceful, unoffending, industrious citizen, who had always supported his family in comfort and respectability, besides paying every year a large sum to the master of his wife, as an equivalent for her services. Now these beloved ones, for whom he had so cheerily lived and labored for are suddenly torn from him--to be carried he knows not whither—and to all the miseries of Southern bondage. Could there be any greater outrage on humanity? -- Can any human enactment give en a color of justice to such a proceeding!

After several months had passed, Mr. Ray received a letter from Mr. Garnett, stating that he had published a pamphlet in Scotland, containing the facts in the case, and an

appeal to the benevolent to contribute for the redemption of the Weems family. This appeal was circulated in England also, and excited much interest there. One family, residing at Newcastle-upon-Tyne, well known for their philanthropy and sympathy for the oppressed, were particularly active in this matter and it was owing a great measure to their exertions that a generous sum was raised. When the money was received from Scotland and England, Weems' friends lost no time in communicating to him the good news. He sent back word, that he had heard from his wife and children, and they were in Montgomery, Alabama; except Catharine and Ann Maria, who had been sold to a slave-trader in Maryland, by the name of Price.

A gentleman, who we shall call *William Penn*, while on his way to redeem the members of an enslaved family for Mrs. Harriet B. Stowe, met Mrs. Weems and her children in a drove, on their way to Alabama. He had known Weems as a worthy and industrious man, and his sympathies were strongly aroused on his behalf and that of his family. Writing to a friend afterwards, he says, "I was easily committed to do all I could for them." The friends in New York were glad to avail themselves of his service, and he proceeded, as soon as possible, to negotiate the purchase of Mrs. Weems and two of the boys. They were brought back and restored to the husband and father. After this family took up their residence in Washington city. The same gentlemen negotiated for the freedom of Catherine, the second daughter, for whose ransoms \$1000 were paid. She went into the service of a respectable liberty loving man, in the District of Columbia, where (---?) person thick and of hair. Inclined to be handy---. Her parents are free and reside in Washington, D.C.. It is evident she was taken away by some one in a carriage, probably by a white man, by whom she may be carried beyond the limits of the State of Maryland.

I will give the above reward for her apprehension and detention so that I get her back.

"C.M. Price"

So large a reward made it necessary for the distant friends of the young fugitive girl to proceed with caution. The person who had undertaken to bring Ann Maria away, procured for her a suit of boy's clothes, and thus disguised after leaving her master's house, she was secreted in a town and very far distant for more than two months. All this time we were in uncertainty as to her fate; dreading lest we should hear, that she had been caught and carried back into the house of bondage. At length word came, that she was on her way and might be expected here the next day. In the evening (Nov. 28th) being the eve of Thanksgiving Day, a friend arrived bringing with him a bright handsome *boy*, whom he called Joe. Most heartily was "Joe" welcomed. *We* were glad to see him, but took good care that he should not be seen by others! While their family went in the parlour, with their guests, partaking of the bounties of Providence, Joe was safely locked up in the attic eating his portion of the turkey and plum pudding. It was his first Thanksgiving dinner in a free State.

As he brought nothing away with him, and had only the suit of clothes which he wore, it was necessary, next day, to procure a complete wardrobe of another sort. The third day after Joe's arrival, a gentleman was found, (Rev. Mr. F., a coloured minister of the city,) who was willing to accompany him to his Uncle Brown's in Canada West. The following is a part of a letter from Mr. F., giving an account of their journey. After stating that they left New York in the cars, at five o'clock, P.M., and through the providence of God, went on their way safely and speedily, with none to molest, or make them afraid, he says:

"On reaching Rochester, I began to ask myself, 'How shall we get over Niagara Falls.' I was not sure that the cars ran across the Suspension Bridge; besides, I felt that we were in a more danger here, than we had been at any other places. Knowing that there was a large reward offered for Joe's apprehension, I feared that there might be some lurking spy, ready to pounce upon us. But when we arrived at the Bridge, the conductor said, 'Sit still; this car goes across!' You may judge of my joy and relief of mind, when I looked out, and was sure that we were over! 'Thank God,' I exclaimed, 'we are safe in Canada!'

"Having now a few minutes before the care would start again, I sat down, and hastily wrote a few lines, to inform friends at home of our safe arrival. As soon as possible, I ran to the Post Offices with my letter, paid the postage, and while I was waiting for my change, the car-bell rang; I quickly returned, entered the cars, and in a few minutes we were on our way to Chatham (200 miles west), which we reached between seven and eight o'clock, Saturday evening. When we got out, we met a gentleman, who asked me if I wanted a boarding home. I said yes; and he invited me to go with him. I asked him if there was any way for me to get to D. that night. He answered, 'No, it is a dark night, and a muddy road, and no conveyance can be got to-night.' I soon found that our only alternative was to stay with him, and make Chatham our home to Monday morning.

"On our way to the boarding home, the gentleman said to me, 'Is this your son with you?' I answered 'No;' and then I asked him if he knew a man living in D., by the name of Brown; I said 'this is a relation of his.' He replied that he was very well acquainted with him, and then inquired if that young man was Mr. Brown's brother.' I said 'No--- not exactly a brother.' He must have thought it strange, that I did not give a more definite answer to his questions.

"When we reached the home we found several boarders in the sitting room, and (---?---) some around, and found him close behind, coming after us. As he came up he exclaimed, 'I can't go to M.!' -and began talking to Ann Marie, asking her about all friends whom they had left behind--about Uncles and Aunts--about his old master, and his wife's master -from whom they had run away, four years before.

"As we approached the house, he said 'I will go and open the gate, and have a good fire to warm you.' When he came up to the gate we met his wife on the road returning from a store, or a neighbour's house, and he said to her, 'that's Ann Maria coming yonder!' She stopped until we came up to the gate-the tears were rolling from her eyes

and she exclaimed, 'Ann Maria, is it you? O, Ann Maria!' The girls leaped from the wagon, and they fell upon each other's necks, weeping and rejoicing. Such a *scene* I never before witnessed. She who had been given up a lost, was now found! She who but a short time before had been, as they supposed, a slave for life, was free!

"We soon entered the house, and after the first gush of feeling had somewhat subsided, they both began general enquiry about the friends they had left behind. But every now and then Aunt would break out, 'My child, you are here! Thank God you are free! We were talking about you again--and now, here you are with us!'

"I remained about an hour and a half with them, took dinner, and then started for home, rejoicing that I had been to a land, where colored men are free.

"This Mr. Brown, who ran away with himself and wife, about four years ago, from the land of whips and chains, is the owner of two farms, and is said to be worth three thousand dollars. Can slaves take care of themselves?"

You may suppose that the receipt of such a letter gave us great pleasure, and called forth heartfelt thanksgiving to Him, who had watched over this undertaking, and protected all concerned in it. A bright and promising girl has been rescued from the untold miseries of a slave-woman's lot, and has found a 'good home, where she will have opportunity to acquire an education, and be trained for a useful and happy life. Mr. Brown intends to send for her parents and hope to prevail on them to come and live with him.

The home which Ann Maria could not find in her own land, she had found in the dominion of the Queen of England. The United States boasts that all men are created equal, but England carries the doctrine into full practice. It may be said by Canadians as well as by the inhabitants of the mother country:

*"Slaves cannot breath in England: if their lungs
Receive our air, that moment that they are free:
They touch our country, and their shackles fall."*

And it shall be said, once and again, not by Britain alone, but by the descendants of Britain, wherever they dwell:

*"That's noble, and bespeaks a nation proud
And jealous of the blessing, Spread it, then,
And let it circulate through ev'ry vein
Of all your empire: that, where Britain's power
Is felt, mankind may feel her mercy too."*

B.J.T.