

**THE MASTERSHIP AND ITS FRUITS: THE
EMANCIPATED SLAVE FACE TO FACE
WITH HIS OLD MASTER. A
SUPPLEMENTAL REPORT TO HON. EDWIN
M. STANTON, SECRETARY OF WAR**

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The mastership and its fruits: the emancipated slave face to face with his old master. A supplemental report to Hon. Edwin M. Stanton, secretary of war by James MacKaye

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JAMES MACKAYE

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A SUPPLEMENTAL REPORT TO

HON. EDWIN M. STANTON,

Secretary of War,

BY JAMES McKAYE,

Special Commissioner.



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THE EMANCIPATED SLAVE,

FACE TO FACE

WITH HIS OLD MASTER.

(Valley of the Lower Mississippi.)

To the Hon. EDWIN M. STANTON,
Secretary of War:

Of all portions of the slave region to which the Commission have had access, the valley of the lower Mississippi affords the most interesting field for the observation and study of the slave system, as well as of the great changes which, at the present moment, slave society is everywhere undergoing. Unlike most other sections visited by the Commission, here are found all the elements of that society still in existence; but in a state of revolution and transformation. Here, facing the broad river on either side, still stands the great white mansion of the planter; by its side, just without its shadow, the long rows of cabins called the negro quarters, and, a little in the rear, the great quadrangular structure, usually of brick, known as the sugar-house. In many instances the old master still occupies the mansion, and the negroes their old quarters; but under circumstances and in relations quite new, strange, and full of anxiety to both.

During a recent visit to the neighborhood of these mansions and negro quarters, many important facts came to light, and many important suggestions occurred, not elsewhere presented.

In most other sections visited by the Commission, slave society had been observed in a state of total disruption. Either

the master or the slave, or both, had become fugitives. In South Carolina, the masters had absconded, leaving their habitations and their slaves. In Virginia and North Carolina, as well as in many localities in the southwest held by our armies, the emancipated could only be seen as fugitives, and the old masters not at all. On the contrary in such portions of the valley of the Lower Mississippi as are within our military lines, and especially in the river region of Louisiana, many of them still stand face to face in the presence of the great revolution, and of the trials to which it summons both.

Before entering further into the considerations especially suggested by the state of things here presented, it is important to advert to some of the peculiar features of the slave system, as it existed in this part of the country.

In the first place, the origin and character of the first settlers of Louisiana and the Lower Mississippi had an important bearing in modifying many of its features. These settlers were for the most part, of French, Spanish, and Portuguese origin, or of what has been called the Latin Race, and it is said that the people of this race do by no means entertain the same rooted antipathies, and low consideration of the black race, as are generally ascribed to the races with a shade whiter skin.

However this may be, it is undoubtedly true that there is found here a much more general admixture of the black and white races than prevails elsewhere, even in the slave breeding States. And all the evidence goes to show that there existed in this region, especially in the earlier days of its settlement, a much greater social equality between the two races. No such utter repudiation of the manhood of the negro race, existed here as constituted the basis of the slave system in the islands and coasts of South Carolina and Georgia. Hence, although the amount of labor imposed upon the slave was often greater, and the system of punishments as cruel, yet their ordinary and habitual condition was better, and their daily life on a higher scale. They were not so rigorously forbidden the use of a family name. Their habitations were much more like those of other human beings. Usually their cabins contained not less than

two rooms, and often four. They were furnished with some sort of beds and bedding, and in their lodging those who considered themselves man and wife were separated from the single; the young, also, of different sexes slept in separate apartments; they did not usually eat at a family table, but they had dealt out to them, generally sufficiently cooked rations, which they might eat as they chose—the cooking being done for the whole force by regular details. On the other hand, “the hours of labor on the sugar plantations were from fifteen to eighteen per day, and at certain seasons of the year a greater part of the night was also occupied with labor. The hour of beginning work in the morning was from 3 to 4 o’clock. The overseer was expected to produce a certain crop with a given number of hands, and all were obliged to obey him in preference to the master. He was generally much more cruel than the master. Kind-hearted masters sometimes select cruel overseers.”

I quote above from the testimony of Mr. J. B. Roudanez, a free mulatto creole of New Orleans, a man of great intelligence and probity, who had been employed as an engineer and mechanic upon many of the sugar plantations in the region of country under consideration. No man could have had a more thorough acquaintance with plantation life than he, and no man in the city of his residence bears a higher reputation for truth and sobriety.

He says, further, “that upon some plantations the women were worked as hard as the men, and in some instances were kept at labor in every stage of pregnancy, even up to the moment of delivery. Sometimes they were sent into the field one week after confinement; but ordinarily they were given one month in which to recover. Mothers were usually permitted to nurse their children for a half hour three times a day for the space of three months.”

Another witness, Dr. E. C. Hyde, an old physician who had lived and practiced more than thirty years among the planters of North and South Carolina and in the Valley of the Mississippi, upon his examination declared, “that the slave women were forced to labor from pregnancy to maternity. I have known of births between the cotton rows; they were compelled to hoe out their row, and then given an hour to recover.”

"Many planters on the Mississippi do not wish to raise negro children; they would rather they would die than live—they do not think it profitable."

"As to chastity," says Mr. Roudanez, "no such thing was known on the plantations. In the first place, the overseers had the run of all the field women, and if one of them refused, an occasion was very soon found for subjecting her to a severe punishment." "I have known," says another reliable witness, "women to be severely whipped for not coming to the quarters of the overseer or master for the purposes of prostitution, when ordered so to do." "The old masters usually made their selections from the house servants and the young masters generally preferred for their concubines their half-sisters. It was the common custom. They were usually taken at the age of thirteen or fourteen. I have known girls to be mothers at that age. This was especially true of French creoles." "Their own offspring," says Dr. Hyde, "were treated as slaves; they were frequently subjected to ferocious treatment, and sold, to put them out of their sight." "The practice of indiscriminate sexual intercourse," continues Mr. Roudanez, "was so universal that a chaste colored girl at the age of seventeen was almost unknown." "The planters' habit of cohabitation with their slave women was a source of great suffering to these women. Frequently the jealous wife would procure them to be whipped or otherwise punished upon false charges, and often when their husbands were absent had them punished in their own presence." The tortures sometimes inflicted upon these helpless favorites of the husband by the infuriated wife, in order to render them less attractive to the husband, are not to be described. "The fact of the promiscuous cohabitation was well known to both parents and children."

Nor were the punishments less severe here than in other portions of the slave region. Whipping with the paddle, scourging with the whip of twisted bull's hide or knotted cords: torturing with the heavy iron-horned collar and with heavy iron rings with chain attached, worn upon the ankle for months; confinement in the stocks in the dark cells of the plantation prisons, often without food, and hunting with blood-hounds, were all practiced here as well as elsewhere. "Some whites," says Mr. Roudanez,

“made hunting slaves with blood-hounds a regular profession.”

And yet, notwithstanding all this, there did exist among these people a kind of human life, full, it is true, of the most unheard-of toil, and of the most dreadful suffering, and yet, in degradation, it did not approach by many degrees, the slave life upon the shores of South Carolina.

Besides the circumstances already referred to, there were others peculiar to this section of country, which had their influence upon the working of the slave-system, as well as on the character of the slave population. The sugar culture, which, as we have seen, at certain seasons of the year, exacted the most formidable labors, required also, for its successful prosecution, a certain degree of judgment and skill in those employed in it. A portion of the people on every sugar plantation had to be mechanics and artisans. This had its effect in the development of a higher general intelligence upon these plantations. “Generally,” says Mr. Roudanez, “upon every plantation there was at least one man who had somehow learned to read a little, and in secret used to read to the others, notwithstanding the severe punishment always inflicted, upon the detection of such offences.” “On the day following that on which the news of the execution of John Brown reached New Orleans, I started for a plantation seventy-five miles up the river. Soon after my arrival there, a slave gave me a detailed account of the execution. That morning a slave in the sugar-house had asked of his master a piece of paper to wipe some portion of the machinery. He handed him a newspaper, the greater part of which he retained, and afterwards secretly read it to the whole force. It contained an account of John Brown’s execution.”

Another fact had its effect. The sugar plantations of the Valley of the Mississippi for the most part front upon the river, or upon some bayou, navigable at least for flat-boats, and in the rear abut upon interminable cypress swamps. These swamps became places of refuge for the slave pushed to the last extremity, very difficult of access even to the master of the blood-hounds. Many instances are known of slaves having lived for years in the recesses of these swamps, thickly wooded as they are with great cypress and cotton-wood trees, from whose branches hang suspended the long