

**SELECT CHRISTIAN AUTHORS, WITH
INTRODUCTORY ESSAY BY JAMES
MONTGOMERY. NO. 46. OLNEY HYMNS: IN
THREE BOOKS. I. ON SELECT TEXTS OF
SCRIPTURE. II. ON OCCASIONAL SUBJECTS. III.
ON THE PROGRESS AND CHANGES OF THE
SPIRITUAL LIFE; SECOND EDITION**

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Select Christian Authors, With Introductory Essay by James Montgomery. No. 46. Olney Hymns: In Three Books. I. On Select Texts of Scripture. II. On Occasional Subjects. III. On the Progress and Changes of the Spiritual Life; Second Edition by William Cowper & John Newton

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WILLIAM COWPER & JOHN NEWTON

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No. 46.

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY.

On a small island, covered with palm-trees, lying off the western coast of Africa, visited by none but slave-ships,—in the year 1746, there lived a young man, of respectable English parentage. His mother, whose only child he was, had died during his infancy; and his father being a mariner, much occupied abroad in the mercantile service, maintained little control over his son after the latter had once escaped from under his eye. The youth himself was headstrong and capricious, and, by his rashness or perversity, repeatedly thwarted the prudent purposes of his surviving parent to settle him honourably in his own profession. After a series of strange adventures by sea and land, during which he had escaped various perils, but fallen into many snares, and lost all sense of religion and decorum, he was impressed and carried on board of the *Harwich*, about to sail for the East Indies. Here, though promoted by his father's interest to the rank of midshipman, from the outset he exposed himself to the displeasure of the commander by his irregular conduct, and soon afterwards, in a fit of folly, deserted from the service, at the very time when he was appointed to watch over a boat's company, and prevent any of them from deserting. Being retaken, and brought in chains to the vessel, he was publicly flogged, and expelled from the quarter-deck. When the ship reached Madeira, he was exchanged with the captain

of a merchantman for one more likely to serve his Majesty. From Madeira he was brought to the little island above-mentioned, where, quitting the vessel, he entered into the service of an English speculator in the trade of that coast—a broker in blood, buying and selling men, woman, and children, on such terms, and for such profits, as could be made in that lottery of inhuman adventure. His master, though a slave-dealer, was himself the slave, by brutal passion, of a black woman, who lived with him as his wife, and ruled over his household with a tyranny not surpassed by a native driver, with his cart-whip, in the sugar islands.

How our renegade stripling, at an age when youth and ill health might have softened the heart of the least compassionate of the gentler sex, came to be so much out of favour with his mistress, has not been told by himself, but her cruelty has, and the record will not soon be effaced from his pages, though thousands of wretches like him may have suffered as much, under similar circumstances, whose wrongs and oppressions ceased from the earth with themselves, and were written in no book but that out of which the dead as well as the living shall be judged at the last day. *His* miseries, however, have been preserved by enduring memorials,—perhaps as examples of the horrible re-action and vengeance on the spot, and in the persons of the perpetrators, which, even in this world, accompany the practice of that unexpiated crime against God and man, in which civilized nations have been engaged for more than three centuries—that crime of Christendom, which has robbed Africa of millions of her offspring, peopled the West Indies with a perishing population beyond the power of nature to renew, and brought upon Europe judgments,

which may never be traced to their real source till the secret counsels of Providence shall be revealed, and the ways of God to man be justified, in the presence of all the lost, and all the saved, of heaven and earth.

The sufferings of our unhappy outcast cannot be expressed with equal force by any other words than his own. Let him, then, speak for himself—not at the time;—no, not at the time, for then he would have spoken swords and spears, and buried his complaints under the burden of execrations, which he would have poured, and often did pour out, in the bitterness of his soul, upon the female scourge under whose lash of scorpions he (the representative of guilty England, that fostered such spoilers of Guinea) was daily writhing. No, let him speak, as he spoke long afterwards, when the grace of God had reclaimed and translated him from the bondage of Satan into the kingdom of Christ. Having been left sick by his master, under the care of his mistress, he says:—

“ I had sometimes not a little difficulty to procure a draught of cold water when burning with a fever. My bed was a mat spread upon a board, and a log of wood my pillow. When my fever left me, my appetite returned. I would gladly have eaten, but there was no one gave unto me. She lived in plenty herself, but hardly allowed me sufficient to sustain life, except now and then, when in the highest good humour, she would send me victuals on her own plate, after she had dined; and this (so greatly was my pride humbled) I received with thanks and eagerness, as the most needy beggar does an alms. Once I was called to receive this bounty from her own hand; but, being exceedingly weak and feeble, I dropped the plate. Those who live in plenty can hardly conceive how this loss touched me; but she had the cruelty to laugh at

my disappointment; and though the table was covered with dishes, she refused to give me any more. My distress has been so great as to compel me to go by night and pull up roots in the plantation, (though at the risk of being punished as a thief,) which I have eaten raw upon the spot, for fear of discovery. The roots I speak of are very wholesome food when boiled, but as unfit to be eaten raw as a potato. The consequence of this diet—which after the first experiment I always expected and seldom missed—was the same as if I had taken tartar emetic; so that I have often returned as empty as I went; yet necessity urged me to the trial several times. I have sometimes been relieved by strangers, nay, *even by the slaves in the chain*, who secretly brought me victuals (for they durst not be seen to do it,) *from their own slender pittance.*"

His master also, instigated by her unnatural antipathy, proved as merciless as his mistress. On a coasting voyage, being suspected of theft from the stores,—"almost the only crime I could not justly be charged with," as he himself testifies, he says:—

"The charge was believed, and I was condemned without evidence. From that time he used me very hardly. Whenever he left the vessel, I was locked up on deck, with a pint of rice for my day's allowance, and if he staid longer, I had no relief till his return.—When fowls were killed for his own use, I seldom was allowed any part but the entrails, to bait my hooks with; and at what we call *slack water*, that is, about the changing of the tides, when the current was still, I used generally to fish, (for at other times it was not practicable,) and I often succeeded. If I saw a fish on my hook, my joy was little less than any other person may have found in the accomplishment of the scheme which he had most at heart. Such a fish,

hastily broiled, or rather half burned, without sauce, salt, or bread, has afforded me a delicious meal. If I caught none, I might, if I could, sleep away my hunger till the next return of slack water, and then try again. Nor did I suffer less from the inclemency of the weather and the want of clothes. The rainy season was now advancing; my whole suit was a shirt, a pair of trowsers, a cotton handkerchief instead of a cap, and a cotton cloth about two yards long to supply the want of upper garments; and thus accoutred I have been exposed for twenty, thirty, perhaps nearly forty hours together, in incessant rain, accompanied with strong gales of wind, without the least shelter, when my master was on shore. I feel to this day some faint returns of the violent pains I then contracted. The excessive cold and wet I endured in that voyage, and soon after I had recovered from a long sickness, quite broke my constitution and my spirits. The latter were soon restored; but the effects of the former still remain with me, as a needful memento of the service and the wages of sin."

One circumstance more from his revolting narrative must be quoted here, to consummate the picture of his personal distresses, and to introduce the reader of this sketch to a knowledge of the far-surpassing debasement of his enslaved, abandoned, and infatuated mind. He says to his friend and correspondent, in after life,—“Had you seen me, then, go pensive and solitary, in the dead of the night, to wash my one shirt upon the rocks, and afterwards put it on wet, that it might dry upon my back while I slept;—had you seen me so poor a figure that, when a boat's crew came to the island, shame often constrained me to hide myself in the woods, from the sight of strangers;—especially had you known that my conduct, prin-

ciples, and heart, were still darker than my outward condition, how little would you have imagined.... .”
But we must break off here.

In this iron furnace, heated seven times, under a tropical sun, amidst the pestilential atmosphere of a low coast tangled with woods and traversed by rivers, not rolling their healthful and fertilizing streams into the open sea, but degenerating into shallows and marshes—our young prodigal did *not* come to himself. His heart, which amidst former adversities had been hardened with pride, inflamed with rage, and brooded with resentment, was now brought down, quenched, and subdued. Here he lost all resolution, and almost all reflection, sinking into that fatuity which is the last refuge of exhausted nature in hopeless captivity. He himself thus describes his apathy :—“ I had lost the fierceness which fired me when on board the Harwich, and which made me capable of the most desperate attempts ; but I was no further changed than a tiger tamed by hunger ;—remove the occasion, and he will be as wild as ever.”

Such was his personal and mental, but what was his spiritual state ? It has already been intimated, that he was the only son of his mother ; but she was in her grave ; she could no longer plead for him at a throne of grace ; her earnest intercession for him in infancy seemed to have been answered no otherwise than by her own providential removal from the evil to come upon him. She had not been permitted to live for him to break her heart ; and in mercy to both, *he* was spared that sin unto death—that species of parricide which it is to be feared is more frequent than forgiving parents and rebellious children are themselves aware. His mother, before he was six years