

What was slavery like as a way of living? In the 1830s, ex-slaves, freed or runaway, were beginning to tell their stories in print. Their fascinating details and dramatic adventures carried a powerful antislavery message.

Solomon Northup, a free Negro of New York, was kidnaped in Washington in 1841 and forced into slavery on a cotton plantation near the Red River in Louisiana. Freed in 1853, his story was recorded in Twelve Years a Slave. From it is drawn this vivid picture of a slave auction.

In the first place we were required to wash thoroughly, and men with beards had to shave. We were then furnished with clothes—cheap but clean. The men had hat, coat, shirt, pants, and shoes. The women had dresses and handkerchieves to bind their heads. We were conducted into a large room in the front part of the building in order to be properly trained before the admission of customers. The men were arranged on one side of the room, the women on the other. Freeman, owner of the slave pen, ordered us to remember our places and to appear smart and lively. During the day he exercised us in the art of looking smart and of moving to our places with exact precision.

The next day many customers called to examine Freeman's "new lot." He made us hold up our heads and walk briskly back and forth. Customers would feel of our hands and arms and bodies, then check our mouths and teeth, precisely as a jockey examines a horse which he is about to barter for or purchase.

An old gentleman, who said he wanted a coachman, appeared to take a fancy to me. I learned he was a resident in the city. I very

much desired that he would buy me, because I thought it would be easy to make my escape from New Orleans on some northern vessel. Freeman asked fifteen hundred dollars for me. The old gentleman insisted it was too much, as times were very hard. Freeman, however, declared that I was sound of health, of a good constitution, and intelligent. The old gentleman argued, but finally, to my regret, went out, saying he would call again.

During the day, however, a number of sales were made. David and Caroline were purchased together by a Natchez planter. They left us, grinning broadly, and in a most happy state of mind, because they were not being separated. Sethe was sold to a planter of Baton Rouge, her eyes flashing with anger as she was led away.

The same man also purchased young Randall. The boy had been made to jump and to run across the floor and to perform many other feats, exhibiting his activity and condition. All the time the trade was going on, Randall's mother, Eliza, was crying aloud, and wringing her hands. She begged the man not to buy him, unless he also bought herself and her daughter, Emily. She promised in that case to be the most faithful slave that ever lived. The man answered that he could not afford it, and Eliza burst into tears. Freeman turned round to her savagely with his whip in his uplifted hand, ordering her to stop her noise, or he would flog her. Eliza shrunk before him and tried to wipe away her tears, but it was all in vain. She wanted to be with her children, she said, the little time she had to live.

She kept on begging and beseeching them not to separate the three. Over and over again

she told them how she loved her boy. A great many times she repeated her former promises—how very faithful and obedient she would be; how hard she would labor day and night, to the last moment of her life; if he would only buy them all together. But it was of no avail; the man could not afford it. The bargain was agreed upon, and Randall must go alone. Then Eliza ran to him; embraced him passionately; kissed him again and again; told him to remember her—all the while her tears

falling on the boy's face like rain. Freeman ordered her to go to her place and to behave herself.

The planter from Baton Rouge, with his new purchase, was ready to depart.

“Don't cry, mama. I will be a good boy. Don't cry,” said Randall, looking back as they passed out of the door.

What has become of the lad, God knows. It was a mournful scene indeed. I would have cried myself if I had dared.

CHECK YOUR READING

1. **This selection was written in the words of**
 - A an ex-slave
 - B a slave auctioneer
 - C a social historian
2. **Solomon Northup had been a**
 - A free Negro
 - B slave all his life
 - C slave owner
3. **An old man wanted Solomon for a**
 - A butler
 - B coachman
 - C field hand
4. **Solomon thought that going to the city might mean a**
 - A chance to earn money
 - B new and easier job
 - C chance to escape
5. **The old man didn't buy Solomon because**
 - A the price was too high
 - B he didn't need another slave
 - C Solomon insulted him
6. **The slaves David and Caroline were very happy because they**
 - A were not being separated
 - B had been given their freedom
 - C were given house jobs
7. **The slave Eliza became hysterical with grief because**
 - A her family was being separated
 - B she was being beaten
 - C she was being sold
8. **Young Randall promised his mother that he would**
 - A see her again soon
 - B try to escape
 - C behave well
9. **Solomon wanted to cry at the unhappy scene but didn't because**
 - A men don't cry
 - B as a slave he didn't dare
 - C he was too proud
10. **The selection describes a slave auction as being**
 - A very businesslike
 - B humiliating
 - C Both A and B