

# HALIFAX PEARL,

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## NARRATIVE OF JAMES WILLIAMS, AN AMERICAN SLAVE.

I was born in Powhatan County, Virginia, on the plantation of George Larrimore, sen., at a place called Mount Pleasant, on the 16th of May, 1805. My father was the slave of an orphan family whose name I have forgotten, and was under the care of a Mr. Brooks, guardian of the family. He was a native of Africa, and was brought over when a mere child, with his mother. My mother was the slave of George Larrimore, sen. She was nearly white, and is well known to have been the daughter of Mr Larrimore himself. She died when myself and my twin brother Meshech were five years of age.—I can scarcely remember her. She had in all eight children, of whom only five are now living. One, a brother, belongs to the heirs of the late Mr. Brockenbrough of Charlottesville; of whom he hires his time, and pays annually \$120 for it. He is a member of the Baptist church, and used to preach occasionally. His wife is a free woman from Philadelphia, and being able to read and write, taught her husband. The whites do not know that he can write, and have often wondered that he could preach so well without learning. It is the practice when a church is crowded, to turn the blacks out of their seats. My brother did not like this, and on one occasion preached a sermon from a text, showing that all are of one blood. Some of the whites who heard it, said that such preaching would raise an insurrection among the negroes. Two of them told him that if he would prove his doctrine by Scripture, they would let him go, but if he did not, he should have nine and thirty lashes. He accordingly preached another sermon, and spoke with a great deal of boldness. The two men who were in favor of having him whipped, left before the sermon was over; those who remained, acknowledged that he had proved his doctrine, and preached a good sermon, and many of them came up and shook hands with him. The two opposers, Scott and Brockley, forbid my brother, after this, to come upon their estates. They were both Baptists, and my brother had before preached to their people. During the cholera at Richmond, my brother preached a sermon, in which he compared the pestilence to the plagues, which afflicted the Egyptian slaveholders, because they would not let the people go. After the sermon some of the whites threatened to whip him. Mr. Valentine, a merchant on Shocko Hill prevented them; and a young lawyer named Brooks said it was wrong to threaten a man for preaching the truth. Since the insurrection of Nat. Turner he has not been allowed to preach much.

My twin brother was for some time the property of Mr. John Griggs, of Richmond, who sold him about three years since, to an Alabama Cotton Planter, with whom he staid one year, and then ran away; and in all probability escaped into the free states or Canada, as he was seen near the Maryland line. My other brother lives in Fredericksburg, and belongs to a Mr. Scott, a merchant formerly of Richmond. He was sold from Mr. Larrimore's plantation because his wife was a slave of Mr. Scott. My only sister is the slave of John Smith, of King William. Her husband was the slave of Mr. Smith, when the latter lived in Powhatan county, and when he removed to King William, she was taken with her husband.

My old master, George Larrimore, married Jane Roane, the sister of a gentleman named John Roane, one of the most distinguished men in Virginia, who in turn married a sister of my master. One of his sisters married a Judge Scott, and another married Mr. Brockenbrough of Charlottesville. Mr. Larrimore had three children; George, Jane, and Elizabeth. The former was just ten days older than myself; and I was his playmate and constant associate in childhood. I used to go with him to his school, and carry his books for him as far as the door, and meet him there when the school was dismissed. We were very fond of each other, and frequently slept together. He taught me the letters of the alphabet, and I should soon have acquired a knowledge of reading, had not George's mother discovered her son in the act of teaching me. She took him aside and severely reprimanded him. When I asked him, not long after, to tell me more of what he had learned at school, he said that his mother had forbidden him to do so any more, as her father had a slave, who was instructed in reading and writing, and on that account proved very troublesome. He could, they said, imitate the hand-writing of the neighbouring planters, and used to write passes and certificates of freedom for the slaves, and finally wrote one for himself, and went off to Philadelphia, from whence her father received from him a saucy letter, thanking him for his education.

The early years of my life went by pleasantly. The bitterness

of my lot I had not yet realized. Comfortably clothed and fed, kindly treated by my old master and mistress and the young ladies, and the playmate and confidant of my young master, I did not dream of the dark reality of evil before me.

When he was fourteen years of age, master George went to his uncle Brockenbrough's at Charlottesville, as a student of the University. After his return from College, he went to Paris and other parts of Europe, and spent three or four years in study and travelling. In the meantime I was a waiter in the house, dining-room servant, etc. My old master visited and received visits from a great number of the principal families in Virginia. Each summer, with his family, he visited the Sulphur Springs and the mountains. While George was absent, I went with him to New-Orleans, in the winter season, on account of his failing health. We spent three days in Charleston, at Mr. McDuffie's, with whom my master was on intimate terms. Mr. McDuffie spent several days on one occasion at Mt. Pleasant. He took a fancy to me, and offered my master the servant whom he brought with him and \$500 besides, for me. My master considered it almost an insult, and said after he was gone, that Mr. McDuffie needed money, to say the least, as much as he did.

He had a fine house in Richmond, and used to spend his winters there with his family, taking me with him. He was not there much at other times, except when the Convention of 1829 for amending the State constitution, was held in that city. He had a quarrel with Mr. Neal of Richmond Co., in consequence of some remarks upon the subject of slavery. It came near terminating in a duel. I recollect that during the sitting of the Convention, my master asked me before several other gentlemen, if I wished to be free and go back to my own country. I looked at him with surprise, and enquired what country?

"Africa, to be sure," said he, laughing.

I told him that was not my country—that I was born in Virginia.

"Oh yes," said he, "but your father was born in Africa." He then said that there was a place on the African coast called Liberia where a great many free blacks were going; and asked me to tell him honestly, whether I would prefer to be set free on condition of going to Africa, or live with him and remain a slave. I replied that I had rather be as I was.

I have frequently heard him speak against slavery to his visitors. I heard him say on one occasion, when some gentlemen were arguing in favor of sending the free colored people to Africa, that this was as really the black man's country as the white's, and that it would be as humane to knock the free negroes, at once, on the head, as to send them to Liberia. He was a kind man to his slaves. He was proud of them, and of the reputation he enjoyed of feeding and clothing them well. They were as near as I can judge about 300 in number. He never to my knowledge sold a slave, unless to go with a wife or husband, and at the slave's own request. But all except the very wealthiest planters in the neighbourhood sold them frequently. John Smoot of Powhatan Co. has sold a great number. Bacon Tait used to be one of the principal purchasers. He had a jail at Richmond where he kept them. There were many others who made a business of buying and selling slaves. I saw on one occasion while travelling with my master, a gang of nearly two hundred men fastened with chains. The women followed unchained and the children in wagons. It was a sorrowful sight. Some were praying, some crying, and they all had a look of extreme wretchedness. It is an awful thing to a Virginia slave to be sold for the Alabama and Mississippi country. I have known some of them to die of grief, and others to commit suicide, on account of it.

In my seventeenth year, I was married to a girl named Harriet, belonging to John Gatewood, a planter living about four miles from Mt. Pleasant. She was about a year younger than myself—was a tailoress, and used to cut out clothes for the hands.

We were married by a white clergyman named Jones; and were allowed two or three weeks to ourselves, which we spent in visiting and other amusements.

The field hands are seldom married by a clergyman. They simply invite their friends together and have a wedding party.

Our two eldest children died in their infancy: two are now living. The youngest was only two months old when I saw him for the last time. I used to visit my wife on Saturday and Sunday evenings.

My young master came back from Europe in delicate health. He was advised by his physicians to spend the winter in New-Orleans, whither he accordingly went, taking me with him. Here he became acquainted with a French lady of one of the first fami-

lies in the city. The next winter he also spent in New-Orleans, and on his third visit, three years after his return from Europe, he was married to the lady above mentioned. In May he returned to Mr. Pleasant, and found the elder Larrimore on his sick bed, from which he never rose again. He died on the 14th of July. There was a great and splendid funeral, as his relatives and friends were numerous.

His large property was left principally in the hands of his widow until her decease, after which it was to be divided among the three children. In February Mrs. Larrimore also died. The administrators upon the estate were John Green, Esq., and Benjamin Temple.

My young mistresses, Jane and Elizabeth, were very kind to the servants. They seemed to feel under obligations to afford them every comfort and gratification, consistent with the dreadful relation of ownership which they sustained towards them. Whipping was scarcely known on the estate; and whenever it did take place, it was invariably against the wishes of the young ladies.

But the wife of master George was of a disposition entirely the reverse. Feeble, languid, and inert, sitting motionless for hours at her window, or moving her small fingers over the strings of her guitar, to some soft and languishing air, she would have seemed to a stranger incapable of rousing herself from that indolent repose, in which mind as well as body participated. But, the slightest disregard of her commands—and sometimes even the neglect to anticipate her wishes, on the part of the servants, was sufficient to awake her. The inanimate and delicate beauty then changed into a stormy virago. Her black eyes glowed and sparkled with a snaky fierceness, her full lips compressed, and her brows bent and darkened. Her very voice, soft and sweet when speaking to her husband, and exquisitely fine and melodious, when accompanying her guitar, was at such times, shrill, keen, and loud. She would order the servants of my young mistresses upon her errands, and if they pleaded their prior duty to obey the calls of another, would demand that they should be forthwith whipped for their insolence. If the young ladies remonstrated with her, she met them with a perfect torrent of invective and abuse. In these paroxysms of fury she always spoke in French, with a vehemence and volubility, which strongly contrasted with the calmness and firmness of the young ladies. She would boast of what she had done in New-Orleans, and of the excellent discipline of her father's slaves. She said she had gone down in the night to the cell under her father's house, and whipped the slaves confined there with her own hands. I had heard the same thing from her father's servants at New-Orleans, when I was there with my master. She brought with her from New-Orleans a girl named Frances. I have seen her take her by the ear, lead her up to the side of the room, and beat her head against it. At other times she would snatch off her slipper and strike the girl on her face and head with it.

She seldom manifested her evil temper before master George. When she did, he was greatly troubled, and he used to speak to his sisters about it. Her manner towards him was almost invariably that of extreme fondness. She was dark complexioned, but very beautiful; and the smile of welcome with which she used to meet him was peculiarly fascinating. I did not marvel that he loved her; while at the same time, in common with all the house servants, I regarded her as a being possessed with an evil spirit,—half woman, and half fiend.

Soon after the settlement of the estate, I heard my master speak of going out to Alabama. His wife had 1500 acres of wild land in Greene County in that State: and he had been negotiating for 500 more. Early in the summer of 1833, he commenced making preparations for removing to that place a sufficient number of hands to cultivate it. He took great pains to buy up the wives and husbands of those of his own slaves, who had married out of the estate, in order, as he said, that his hands might be contented in Alabama, and not need chaining together while on their journey. It is always found necessary by the regular slave-traders, in travelling with their slaves to the far South, to handcuff and chain their wretched victims, who had been bought up as the interest of the trader, and the luxury or necessities of the planter may chance to require, without regard to the ties sundered or the affections made desolate, by these infernal bargains. About the 1st of September, after the slaves destined for Alabama had taken a final farewell of their old home, and of the friends they were leaving behind, our party started on their long journey. There were in all 214 slaves, men, women and children. The men and women travelled on foot—the small children in the wagons, containing the baggage, etc. Previous to my departure, I