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[Chapter IV, pages 20-23]

#### MY OWNERS. THEIR TREATMENT. MY CONDUCT AS A SLAVE. VIEWS REGARDING SLAVERY, AND STRONG DESIRES FOR FREEDOM

I had five owners. Nicholas Harden was the first one. He owned my mother, and when born I was his property, according to the law of a free (?) country. As live property changed hands very often in those glorious (?) days, I soon passed from my first owner to his son, Matthew Harden. After being in his possession a short time the family wheel revolved once more and landed me into the hands of Nicholas Harden, the son of Matthew and grandson of Nicholas Harden, my first owner.

Before I had got fairly settled down to my new home and acquainted with the new surroundings once more the family revolving wheel sent me to a new owner, Mr. Thomas Majors, who had married the granddaughter of my first owner. I should state here that before I passed into Mr. Major's hands I had been sold to a slave-trader by the name of William Belt, June, 1811, when I was ten years old. Mr. Nicholas Harden told me that he had hired me out to Mr. Belt. But his conscience smote him for his sin, and he became very much troubled, so that he could not rest or sleep at night.

The following Sunday morning he got up very early and went to see Mr. Belt in order to buy me back, but William Belt would not consent to sell me back.

Miss Julia Harden, my owner's daughter, asked me if I knew why her father had gotten up so early that morning. I told her I did not. Then she told me her father had sold me to Mr. Belt and was troubled about it and had gone to see if Mr. Belt would sell me to him again, but that Mr. Belt had refused to do so. She said: "Father has returned and told mother that that he does not know what to do about it." My mistress then came and told me to go and see Mr. Belt and beg off from him. I went to see Mr. Belt and found him sitting cross-legged in his parlor. I said "Good morning, Mr. Belt. He said "Good morning." Then I said, "Mr. Belt, I understand that you have bought me and I came to see if you will not give me up. Won't you please give me up?" He asked me several questions, and I answered them politely, and he said, "You are a smart fellow, and I reckon I will have to give you up." I said, "Thank you, sir." And returned home with a light heart. Mr. Harden returned Mr. Belt his money, and thus I was saved from being sold South. I do not call Mr. Belt my owner, because I did not go into his hands.

Mr. Elisha Bennett was my fifth and last owner. He bought me when in my thirteenth year. Upon the whole I had what might be called good masters, but the mistress was not always a

good woman. Many slaves received cruel treatment because the mistress was often a bad woman, "the worst thing the devil ever made."

A slave's path was not strewn with roses. I had to go barefooted the most of the year till I was a young man. In the fall I would have to go out into the meadow while the grass was white with frost to drive up the horses and cows. I warmed my cold feet many times by standing on the place where a horse or cow had been lying and just driven up. During the fall and early winter my feet would get hard and dry and crack open and become very sore. My mother used to wash them in pot liquor to heal them.

I had to reap in the harvest field barefooted, and to walk upon the new-made stubble was no pleasant task. My clothes were of the coarsest material and few in quantity.

I was always willing and obedient to those who owned me. I never was whipped save once by any of my owners. I received a few strokes over my shoulders for letting a piece of meat fall. I never called any of my owners "Master." I used the term "Boss" instead. I could not bear the thought of one man owning another and having to call him master. I owned but one Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. I regarded slaveholding a great crime, one that man should give an account of in the day of judgment. After a careful study of the subject I came to the conclusion that all men ought to be free, and all good men should work to accomplish that end. I resolved within my own self that I would never increase slavery by any act of mine.

I had a great desire to be free, and if I could not reach that end I resolved never to marry a slave woman, knowing that if the mother was a slave her children were slaves also.

As I grew older my desire for freedom increased. Hence I commenced planning in order to bring about that result. After working all day for my owner I would work till late at night for myself. I made baskets and hickory brooms, distilled peppermint drops, pennyroyal drops, wormseed oil, sweet mint, wild bergamot and tame bergamot drops, sweet fennel and rose oil. These I sold by peddling during holidays.

I was allowed to clear pieces of woodland, and received the first crop raised upon them, all the work being done at night. All the money made in these different lines of night work was saved and guarded with care with the one end in view, the purchasing my freedom, the boon for which my young heart yearned.

Thus I embraced every opportunity of making a few cents that presented itself. While other slaves, less thoughtful, spent the nights in idleness and sleep, I turned a large part of many nights in each year to my account, so that when the books were balanced I was a free man to do as God might direct. That night labor was sweetened by the thought that it was to bring freedom's glorious dawn in the near future.

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After I commenced to preach I was more anxious to be free than ever. I continued to pray to God for freedom, to open the door so that I might buy myself.

I soon concluded to present the matter to my owner. I went to Mr. Bennett and asked him to please to give a chance to buy myself. Then he said, "Do I not treat you well?" I said, "You do, sir." Then he said, "You are worth a thousand dollars, but I will set you free. You shall not serve a day longer than my brother, who has six years before he is twenty-one." I then did to him, "If you will give me a chance, I can get free a little sooner than six years." He said, "Give me four hundred dollars and you can go by paying me what money you have and giving me security for the balance." I said no more about my freedom at that time, but I continued to pray to the Judge of all the earth to help me in the struggle for liberty and then waited patiently for the result.

Not a great while after our first interview in regard to my freedom, Mr. Bennett came to me and said, "John, I have come to the conclusion to give you your freedom if you will give me three hundred dollars and remain with me one year." I replied, "Mr. Bennett, if you will give me time enough I will give you two hundred dollars and ten months' work." My old boss said, "You can go for that. Pay me what money you have and I do not want any security or interest for the balance. Get someone to draw up writings to that effect and that will settle it."

I complied with the request and had the agreement drawn up and signed it, paid what money I had saved for the anticipated day when God should open the door of the salve institution and let His servant go free. I went forth from that day as a free man in body and soul.