

Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman (1857)

Austin Steward was born in 1793 in Prince William County, Virginia. As a youth, he was brought to upstate New York where he eventually secured his freedom. In his memoirs, published in 1857, Steward wrote: "Everywhere that Slavery exists, it is nothing but slavery. I found it just as hard to be beaten over the head with a piece of iron in New York as it was in Virginia. Whips and chains are everywhere necessary to degrade and brutalize the slave, in order to reduce him to that abject and humble state which Slavery requires" (107-108). The full text of his memoir, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman* (Rochester, NY: William Alling), is available on-line at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/steward/steward.html>.

1. I was born in Prince William County, Virginia. At seven years of age, I found myself a slave on the plantation of Captain William Helm. Our family consisted of my father and mother - whose names were Robert and Susan Steward - a sister, Mary, and myself. As was the usual custom, we lived in a small cabin, built of rough boards, with a floor of earth, and small openings in the sides of the cabin were substituted for windows. The chimney was built of sticks and mud; the door, of rough boards; and the whole was put together in the rudest possible manner (13).

2. Captain Helm . . . resolved at last to visit the far-off "Genesee Country," which he shortly after put in practice, and after an absence of about three weeks he returned in good health, and delighted with the country; the more so, doubtless, because he said, "the more slaves a man possessed in that country the more he would be respected, and the higher would be his position in society." Captain Helm finally concluded to sell his plantation and stock, except the slaves, and remove to the Genesee Country, where he designed to locate his future residence. . . . Little did Captain Helm think when bringing his slaves to New York that in a few short years, they would be singing the song of deliverance from Slavery's thralldom (42-47).

3. We traveled northward, through Maryland, Pennsylvania, and a portion of New York, to Sodus Bay, where we halted for some time. We made about twenty miles per day, camping out every night, and reached that place after a march of twenty days. Every morning the overseer called the roll, when every slave must answer to his or her name, felling to the ground with his cowhide, any delinquent who failed to speak out in quick time. After the roll had been called, and our scanty breakfast eaten, we marched on again, our company presenting the appearance of some numerous caravan crossing the desert of Sahara. When we pitched our tents for the night, the slaves must immediately set about cooking not their supper only, but their breakfast, so as to be ready to start early the next morning, when the tents were struck; and we proceeded on our journey in this way to the end (52-53).

4. Captain Helm went to Virginia for his family, and returning with them, concluded to locate his future residence in the village of Bath, Steuben County. He purchased a large tract of land near the village, a large grist mill, and two saw mills; also, two farms; . . . and a fine house and lot in the village. He also kept a distillery, which in those days was well patronized, for nearly every body drank whisky; and with Captain Helm it was a favorite beverage (60).

5. A man named Henry Tower came to Bath to hire "slave boys," as we were called. The Captain hired to him Simon and myself. . . . Mr. Tower had just bought a tract of land, three miles this side of the village of Lyons, on the Canandaigua outlet. . . . This tract of land was comparatively wild, there being but a small frame house for a dwelling, one for a store, and another for a blacksmith shop. Mr. Tower had two brothers; James, the eldest, who took charge of the store, and John, the younger, who took charge of the hands who worked on the farm; Henry himself superintending the building of the mills. . . . I was kept busy helping the women about the cooking and house-work. And here, for the first time in my life, I had a comfortable bed to sleep on, and plenty of wholesome food to eat; which was something both new and strange to me (69-70).

6. In the fall of that year, I had the misfortune to cut my foot badly. While chopping fire wood at the door, I accidentally struck my ax against a post, which glanced the blow in such a manner that it came down with sufficient force to nearly sever my great toe from my left foot, gashing upward completely through the large joint, which made a terrible wound. Dr. Taylor was immediately called, and sewed the flesh together, taking two stitches on the upper, and

one on the under, side of the foot, before it began to swell; but when the swelling came on, the stitches on the upper side gave way, which occasioned the toe to fall over so much, that I have been slightly lame from that day to this. For several weeks I was unable to be moved, and was regularly attended by Dr. Taylor, but as soon as it could be done without danger, I was taken back to Captain Helm's (80-81).

7. I managed to purchase a spelling book, and set about teaching myself to read. . . . Every spare moment I could find was devoted to that employment, and when about my work I could catch now and then a stolen glance at my book, just to refresh my memory with the simple lesson I was trying to learn. But here Slavery showed its cloven foot in all its hideous deformity. It finally reached the ears of my master that I was learning to read; and then, if he saw me with a book or a paper in my hand, oh, how he would swear at me, sending me off in a hurry, about some employment. Still I persevered, but was more careful about being seen making any attempt to learn to read. At last, however, I was discovered. . . . I had been set to work in the sugar bush, and I took my spelling book with me. When a spare moment occurred I sat down to study, and so absorbed was I in the attempt to blunder through my lesson, that I did not hear the Captain's son-in-law coming until he was fairly upon me. He sprang forward, caught my poor old spelling book, and threw it into the fire, where it was burned to ashes; and then came my turn. He gave me first a severe flogging, and then swore if he ever caught me with another book, he would "whip every inch of skin off my back" (82-83).

8. My master . . . hired me out to a man by the name of Joseph Robinson, for the purpose of learning me to drive a team. Robinson lived about three miles from the village of Bath, on a small farm, and was not only a poor man but a very mean one. He was . . . tyrannical and cruel to those in his employ; and having hired me as a "slave boy," he appeared to feel at full liberty to wreak his brutal passion on me at any time, whether I deserved rebuke or not; . . . he would frequently draw from the cart-tongue a heavy iron pin, and beat me over the head with it, so unmercifully that he frequently sent the blood flowing over my scanty apparel, and from that to the ground, before he could feel satisfied. . . . Even to this day I shudder at the thought, when I think how Robinson used to fly at me, swearing, foaming, and seeming to think there was no weapon too large or too heavy to strike me with (92-93).

9. A slave girl named Milly, came secretly to Bath. She had been one of Captain Helm's slaves, and he had a while before sold her. . . . She had left her master . . . and was in short, "running away," determined as myself, that she would be a slave no longer; resolved on death, or freedom from the power of the slaveholder. . . . I concluded to accompany her in her flight. When the dark night came on, we started together, and traveled all night. . . . I had been missed at Captain Helm's, and several men started in immediate pursuit. I was weary, and . . . did not see my pursuers until they had well nigh reached the house where I was; but I did see them in time to spring from the house with the agility of a deer, and to run for the woods as for life. . . . I escaped them, thank God, and reached the woods, where I concealed myself for some time As soon as I thought it prudent, I pursued my journey, and finally came out into the open country, near the dwelling of Mr. Dennis Comstock, who, . . . was president of the Manumission Society. To him I freely described my situation, and found him a friend indeed. He . . . wrote a line for me to take to his brother, Otis Comstock, who took me into his family at once. I hired to Mr. Comstock for the season, and from that time onward lived with him nearly four years (110-113).

10. In the winter of that year, I was sent by my employer to Hartland with a sleigh-load of produce, and passed through the village of Rochester. . . . It was a very small, forbidding looking place at first sight, with few inhabitants, and surrounded by a dense forest. . . . In September, 1817, I commenced business in Rochester. . . . I established a meat market, which . . . was liberally patronized by the citizens; but there were butchers in the village who appeared to be unwilling that I should have any share in public patronage. Sometimes they tore down my sign, at others painted it black, and so continued to annoy me until after I had one of their number arrested, which put a stop to their unmanly proceedings. . . . In the summer of 1818, I commenced teaching a Sabbath School for the neglected children of our oppressed race. . . . So strong was the prejudice then existing against the colored people, that very few of the negroes seemed to have any courage or ambition to rise from the abject degradation in which the estimation of the white man had placed him. This year, also, I purchased a lot of land, . . . situated on Main street. . . . Having secured my land, I

began making preparations for building, and soon had a good two story dwelling and store, into which I moved my effects, and commenced a more extensive business (124, 131-132).

Austin Steward describes the Desperation of a Fugitive Slave

Source: Steward, A. (1857). *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman*, 247-251.

When we had passed a few miles out of Albany, the boat hove to, and there came on board four men - one of the number a colored man. The white men repaired to their state-rooms, leaving the colored man on deck, after the boat had returned to the channel. He attracted my attention, by his dejected appearance and apparent hopeless despair. He was, I judged, about forty years of age; his clothing coarse and very ragged; and the most friendless, sorrowful looking being I ever saw. He spake to no one, but silently paced the deck; his breast heaving with inaudible sighs; his brow contracted with a most terrible frown; his eyes dreamily fastened on the floor, and he appeared to be considering some hopeless undertaking. I watched him attentively, as I walked to and fro on the same deck, and could clearly discover that some fearful conflict was taking place in his mind; but as I afterwards repassed him he looked up with a happy, patient smile, that lighted up his whole countenance, which seemed to say plainly, I see a way of escape, and have decided on my course of action. His whole appearance was changed; his heart that before had beat so wildly was quiet now as the broad bosom of the Hudson, and he gazed after me with a look of calm deliberation, indicative of a settled, but desperate purpose. I walked hastily forward and turned around, when, Oh, my God! what a sight was there! Holding still the dripping knife, with which he had cut his throat! and while his life-blood oozed from the gaping wound and flowed over his tattered garments to the deck, the same exultant smile beamed on his ghastly features!

The history of the poor, dejected creature was now revealed: he had escaped from his cruel task-master in Maryland; but in the midst of his security and delightful enjoyment, he had been overtaken by the human blood-hound, and returned to his avaricious and tyrannical master, now conducting him back to a life of Slavery, to which he rightly thought death was far preferable.

The horrors of slave life, which he had so long endured, arose in all their hideous deformity in his mind, hence the convict of feeling which I had observed, - and hence the change in his whole appearance, when he had resolved to endure a momentary pain, and escape a life-long scene of unrequited toil and degradation.

There happened to be on the boat at the time, several companies of citizen soldiers, who, shocked by the awful spectacle, expressed their decided abhorrence of the institution of Slavery, declaring that it was not for such peculiar villainy, that their fathers fought and bled on the battle field. So determined were they in their indignation; so loudly demanded they a cessation of such occurrences on board our boats, and the soil of a free State, that the slaveholders became greatly alarmed, and with all possible dispatch they hurriedly dragged the poor bleeding slave into a closet, and securely locked the door; nor have I ever been able to learn his final doom. Whether the kindly messenger of death released him from the clutches of the man-stealer, or whether he recovered to serve his brutal master, I have never been informed.

On the following morning, I saw in the city papers, "A Card," inserted by the owner of the poor slave on board the steamboat, informing the public that he was returning South with a fugitive slave, who, when arrested, evinced great willingness to return; who had confessed also, that he had done very wrong in leaving his master, for which he was sorry, - but he supposed that the abolitionists had been tampering with him. That was all! Not a word about his attempt to take his life! Oh no, he merely wished to allay the excitement, that the horrid deed had produced on the minds of those present.

I was indignant at the publication of such a deliberate falsehood, and immediately wrote and published that I too was on board the same boat with the fugitive; that I had witnessed an exhibition of his willingness to return to Slavery, by seeing him cut his throat, and lay on the deck wallowing in his blood; that the scene had so excited the sympathies of the soldiers present, that his owner had been obliged to hurry him out of their sight.

When this statement appeared in the newspapers, it so exasperated the friends of the slaveholder, that I was advised to flee from the city, lest I might be visited with personal violence; but I assured my advisers that it was only the wicked who "flee when no man pursueth, but the righteous are bold as a lion."