

Sunshine and Shadow of Slave Life

Reminiscences As Told by Isaac D. Williams to "Tege"

Williams, Isaac D., b. 1821?



The first work I did in Canada was for Mr. Rykert, of St. Catherines, then for James Keith, of the same place. I chopped in the woods for them until my thumb commenced to pain me, and, in fact, my whole arm, from the effect of a shot that was in the fleshy ball of my thumb, a souvenir I received from Mullen when shot by him at the mouth of the cave. This right arm bothered me so I did not know what to do and I was unable to chop or work with it. I got completely out of money and did not have enough to pay a doctor to perform the operation of cutting the shot out, but, as the Lord would have it,

who should come to St. Catharines but my Syracuse friend, Elder Logan, the agent for the underground road in that city, and who had assisted me on my way to Canada. I told him how I could hardly work and he told me to go over with him to Syracuse and he would take me to a skilful surgeon who would cut the thumb for me. He said he thought it was safe and I would not be stopped going there, as now that some time had elapsed since my escape they would not be so likely to be on the lookout.

Some of the white people in the city, hearing that Logan wished me to go with him to the states, made a great fuss about it and said he meant to kidnap me. Nothing would make them believe to the contrary, and they finally made it so hot for him that he left rather hastily, giving me enough money to follow him if I wished. As I had perfect confidence in him I did so, first telling the gentlemen interested in me that I was going to New London, so that they would not suspect my destination.

I reached Syracuse safely and was very kindly received by Logan, who took me to Dr. Hoyt, who performed the operation very skillfully. I asked Logan what he thought I had best do for a living until my wound healed and he said he would go around with me to the schools of the city and I could narrate to some of the teachers parts of my history without giving my name and he would guarantee the facts to be true. I followed his advice and raised some fourteen dollars that way. He then sent me with a letter of introduction to the Rev. James Gregg, pastor of a large Presbyterian church in People Grove, New York state. Mr. Gregg received me very cordially, and as I got there on Saturday he announced at a large funeral he presided at, that the pulpit in his church would be occupied the next day by an escaped slave, who would relate some of his experiences and history. He said that, having been lately from the south, I would be able to give them a realistic picture of slavery's horrors.

The next morning for the first time in my life I occupied a pulpit, and you can imagine my feelings. Logan told me what was expected and I was full of my subject, so, looking over the sea of heads before me, I gave them a plain recital of the chief incidents in my life. I addressed them as "fellow citizens" and said in opening my address that I was born without their advantages of education and they could easily see I was rough and uncultured. I wished to talk a little about the usages of slavery, and if any of the terms I used were not understood by them would they please recollect them and ask me after I was through and I would explain.

After I got through speaking two old gentlemen got up, and each of them after asking me some questions, stated that all I said was true as gospel, as they had seen it themselves. One of them had been an overseer down there and the other one was a carpenter, born and bred in the south and had owned slaves himself, but he had seen the curse of it and left the country. A collection was taken up of thirty dollars and the ladies of the church moved that I should speak again at night, as also did two-thirds of the men. At night when I got to the church I could scarcely get to the pulpit for the vast crowd of men, women, boys and girls, all anxious to hear me. There was barely standing room, even the aisles and the pulpit itself being crowded, which went to show the sentiment of the free north against slavery. Many women shed tears that night as I spoke of the harrowing incidents that came under my observation. I said, addressing the ladies: "How would you like for the African race to be in power and send men that would handcuff your husband right in your house or field, and take him away to Georgia or some place where you never would set eyes on him more or hear aught of him, or take your babe from your breast and sell it by the pound, as I've seen children sold?" Then, turning to the men, I said: "How would you like to see another man and myself enter your home and tear your wife away, handcuffing

her, and perhaps taking your dear little ones also and bear them off from your sight forever? Put it to yourselves, take it home and remember that is the way we were treated and are treated today in another section of this, your country, and of which you so proudly sing 'Sweet land of liberty.' "

I fairly forgot myself in my subject, and my great earnestness impressed my auditors. I was affected to tears myself by some of the word pictures I drew of sorrowful scenes I had witnessed, and hundreds of my audience bowed their heads and wept in sympathy with my sad recitals. I used language I ordinarily never was capable of, and my spirit was full of my subject. I shall never forget that night. It was such an unexpected position for me, a poor, unlettered fugitive, to be placed in, and one I never could have thought I would be able to fill. But I felt the power of the great wrongs done to my race and it stirred me up as I never had been before.

I had to shake hands with everybody as they filed by me for that purpose, and as they grasped my hand and looked me long and sympathetically in the eye I had a practical evidence of their good will by the numerous dollars and half dollars left with me, which amounted in all to seventy dollars. I was pleased, indeed, for one hundred dollars in one day was a pretty large donation, and I knew I could get on now until my arm got well. I was afraid to stay longer in the state, as my history had got noised around and I was running a great risk, though my new-made friends assured me they would stand by and protect me from my persecutors if they appeared. I stopped at Rochester before going back and interviewed the great Fred. Douglas, and from there I went back to St. Catharines, after having a most eventful journey.

As soon as my hand got so I could work I made arrangements to work for some gentlemen who were at that time wood contractors for the Great Western railway of Canada. This was about March 1st, 1855, and I worked for them until the spring of 1867, living most of that time in Ingersoll, Ont. I then came to Pontiac, Mich., and staid there a year, when I moved to East Saginaw, Mich., on April 28th, 1868, going to work for the same gentleman who was a member of the firm that employed me in Canada when in the wood contract business. This gentleman always took a kindly interest in me and my fortune, and to-day he is one of the leading bankers in this city. I had only fifty cents when I struck this town, but have made a good many of them since then, and from 1869 up to the present time I have been employed in general work on my own account. I have prospered greatly and now own a comfortable home and other property which I rent.

I know you will feel interested in learning what became of my two companions who escaped from slavery with me. Let me briefly relate their history

since then. First we will take up Banks. He worked with me until the year 1861, when, the war breaking out between the north and south, he went over to New York state and enlisted in a regiment there, but later on he was put in a South Carolina colored regiment and fought all through the war, chiefly in Tennessee, and was wounded once in the hip. He got some one to write for him to me when he was in the army, and the gist of his letter was that he was well and was down south, giving the rebels hail Columbia. They had given it to him once, he said, and now he was returning the compliment.

On his honorable discharge in 1865 he went to Detroit, where I met him, and he told me many interesting incidents of the war. I saw him last at the state fair held in Detroit a few years ago, and he said he owned a little farm near Wyandotte, this state, and was a contented man, filling the humble **niche** that God had put him in and doing his best to live a good life. He says he never regrets the day we landed in Canada nor his having fought for the stars and stripes, and is glad he did his share towards keeping them still proudly waving.

Christopher Nicholas worked with me three years in Canada, then, hearing of the big inducements to emigrants to British Honduras, he was so carried away by the El Dorado it was painted as being that he left against my earnest protest. I never saw or heard from him until the winter of 1872, when I was visiting Washington, and there, by the merest accident, met him in the street. We were both so surprised and pleased we could hardly speak at first, but at last found our tongues and exchanged experiences.

He said he was grievously disappointed in Honduras, that the men who employed the new emigrants treated them almost as though they were slaves, and after he had been there several years working hard all the time until he owned a little land all he could sell it for was \$50, and with this, hearing that the American war was over and colored folks were free, he sailed for New Orleans, arriving there without a cent, it taking all his money to pay his passage. He then walked from New Orleans to King George county, Virginia, taking six weeks to do it. He finally got there, and, meeting his wife, whom he had to leave when he fled to Canada many years before, they started again in a home, and now he and his family were living in Washington and doing fairly. I then bade him good-bye and have not since heard of him, but suppose he has left this world by now, as he was considerably advanced in years.