JEFFERSON FRANKLIN HENRY

Ex-Slave—Age 78

Athens, Georgia

The widespread branches of a white mulberry tree formed a canopy for the entire yard before Jefferson Henry's gray-painted cottage. Luxuriant hydrangeas in wooden tubs, August lilies in other containers on the old-fashioned flower steps, and a carefully pruned privet hedge gave the place an air of distinction in this shabby neighborhood, and it was not surprising to learn that a preacher, a man highly respected by his race, lived there.

A rap on the door brought quick response from a rumbling bass voice inside the house. "George, is you here already?" In another moment a short, stocky Negro man appeared in the doorway, a collar clutched in one hand, and a slightly embarrassed look on his face. "Good mornin'," he said. "Yes, mam, this is Jeff Henry. I thought you was George done come to take me to Atlanta. One of my good church members is to be buried thar today, and I'se got to preside over the funeral. I can talk to you a few minutes if you ain't got too much to ax me about."

Though Jeff used some dialect, it was not so noticeable as in the speech of most southern Negroes. A scant fringe of kinky gray hair framed his almost[Pg 180] bald head, and he was dressed in his Sunday-best clothes; a gray suit, white shirt, and black shoes, worn but carefully polished.

"This old Negro has been here many a day," he began. "I 'members when all this side of town was in farms and woods with just a few houses scattered about." Just then George drove up and Jeff suggested that the interview be postponed.

At the appointed hour Jeff was waiting to resume his narrative. "I sho is done been wukin' this old brain of mine to bring back them old times 'fore freedom come," he announced. "Anyhow, I was born in Paulding County. Sam and Phyllis Henry was my pa and ma, and they was field hands. Me and James, William, John, Mittie, and Mary was all the chillun they had. Us just played 'round the yard mostly, 'cause thar warn't none of us big enough to do no field wuk wuth talkin' 'bout 'fore the end of the war.

"Slave quarters was off from the big house a piece, and they was built in rows lak streets. Most of the log cabins had one room; some had two, but all of them had plain old stack chimblies made of sticks and red mud. Our beds was just home-made makeshifts, but us didn't know no diffunce 'cause us never had seed no[Pg 181] better ones. They sawed pine posts the right height and bored holes through them and through the slabs they had

cut for the railin's, or side pieces. They jined the bed together with cords that they wove back and forth and twisted tight with a stout stick. Them cords served two purposes; they held the bed together and was our springs too, but if us warn't mighty keerful to keep 'em twisted tight our beds would fall down. Lak them old beds, the mattresses us had them days warn't much compared with what we sleeps on now. Them ticks was made of coarse home-wove cloth, called 'osnaburg,' and they was filled with straw. My! How that straw did squeak and cry out when us moved, but the Blessed Lord changed all that when he gave us freedom and let schools be sot up for us. With freedom Negroes soon got more knowledge of how a home ought to be.

"Grandma Ca'line is the onliest one of my grandparents I can 'member. When she got too old for field wuk, they tuk and used her as a cook up at the big house, and she done the weavin', spinnin', and milkin' too, and kept a eye on the slave chillun whilst the mammies was off in the field.

"No, mam, slaves warn't paid no money them days, and it's mightly little I'se got holt of since.[Pg 182] Anyhow I warn't big enough then to do no wuk, even if folks had been payin' wages to slaves. The most I ever done 'fore the war ended was to fetch water to the kitchen and pick up chips to kindle up the fire when it got low. Matches was so scarce then that fires warn't 'lowed to go slap out, but they did burn mighty low sometimes in summer and us had to use fat lightwood splinters to git 'em started up again.

"Us et home produce them days. Folks didn't know nothin' 'bout livin' out of cans and paper sacks lak they does now. Thar was allus plenty of hog meat, syrup, milk and butter, cornbread, and sometimes us chillun got a biscuit. Thar was one big old garden on the place that had evvything in the way of vegetables growin' in it, besides the patches of beans, peas, 'taters, and the lak that was scattered 'round in the fields. The orchards was full of good fruit sich as apples, peaches, pears, and plums, and don't forgit them blackberries, currants, and figs what growed 'round the aidge of the back yard, in fence corners, and off places. Sho, us had 'possums, plenty of 'em, 'cause they let us use the dogs to trail 'em down with. 'Possums was biled 'til they was tender, then baked with sweet 'taters, and thar ain't no better way been found to fix 'em to[Pg 183] this good day, not even if they's barbecued. Sho, sho, us had rabbits and squirrels by the wholesale, and fish too if us tuk time to do our fishin' at night. They never did lak to see slaves settin' 'round fishin' in the daytime.

"All the cookin' was done in a log cabin what sot a good little piece behind the big house. The big old fireplace in that kitchen held a four-foot log, and when you was little you could set on one end of that log whilst it was a-burnin' on t'other. They biled in pots hangin' from hooks on a iron bar that went all the way 'cross the fireplace, and the bakin' was done in skillets and ovens, but sometimes bread was wropt up in cabbage or collard leaves and baked in hot ashes; that was ashcake. Thick iron lids fitted tight on them old

skillets, and most of 'em had three legs so hot coals could be raked under 'em. The ovens sot on trivets over the coals.

"Our clothes warn't nothin' to talk about. In summer boys wore just one piece and that looked lak a long nightshirt. Winter clothes was jean pants and homespun shirts; they was warm but not too warm. Thar warn't no sich things as Sunday clothes in them days, and I never had a pair of shoes on my foots in slavery[Pg 184] time, 'cause I warn't big enough to wuk. Grown Negroes wore shoes in winter but they never had none in summer.

"Marse Robert Trammell and his wife, Miss Martha, was our marster and mistess. Miss Ada, Miss Emma, and Miss Mary 'Liza was the young misses, and the young marsters was named George Washin'ton and William Daniel. Marse Robert and his fambly lived in a log and plank house with a rock chimbly. He was buildin' a fine rock house when the war came on, but he never got it finished.

"Robert Scott, one of the slaves, was made foreman atter Marse Robert turned off his overseer. Gilbert was the carriage driver and 'sides drivin' the fambly 'round, he tuk Marse Robert's ma, Miss Betsey, to her church at Powder Springs. Miss Betsey was a Hardshell Baptist, and Marse Robert and his wife wouldn't go to church with her.

"That old plantation was a large place all right enough; I 'spects thar was 'bout four or five hunderd acres in it. Marse Robert warn't no big slave holder and he didn't have so awful many slaves. His foreman had 'em out in the fields by daylight and wuked 'em 'til dark. The women had a certain stint of thread to spin and cloth to weave 'fore they could go to bed at night. The menfolks had to shuck corn, mend horse-collars, make baskets, and all sich jobs as that[Pg 185] at night, and they had to holp the women with the washin' sometimes. Most of that kind of thing was done on days when the weather was too hot for 'em to work in the fields.

"Marse Robert done his own whippin' of his slaves and, let me tell you, they didn't have to do much for him to whip 'em; he whipped 'em for most anything. They was tied, hand and foots, to a certain tree, and he beat 'em with a heavy leather strop. I'se seed him whip 'em heaps of times, and it was 'most allus in the mornin's 'fore they went to wuk. Thar warn't no jailhouse nigh whar us lived and Marse Robert never had no place to lock slaves up when they got too bad, so he just beat the meanness out of 'em. Thar was one slave he never tetched; that was his foreman and his name was Robert too, lak I done told you.

"I never seed no slaves sold on the block or auctioned off, and if any droves of slaves for sale passed our plantation I'se done forgot about it. No, mam, a slave warn't 'lowed to take no book in his hand to larn nothin'; it was agin' the law to permit slaves to do that sort of thing. If us went to any churches at all it had to be our white folks' churches, 'cause thar warn't no churches for Negroes 'til the war was over. Not a slave on our place

could read a word from[Pg 186] the Bible, but some few could repeat a verse or two they had cotch from the white folks and them that was smart enough made up a heap of verses that went 'long with the ones larned by heart. Us went to Poplar Springs Baptist church with Marse Robert's fambly; that church was 'bout 3 miles from whar us lived. Miss Betsey, she tuk Grandma Ca'line with her to the Hardshell Baptist church about 10 miles further down the road. Sometimes Grandma Ca'line would go by herself when Marse Robert's ma didn't go. Us just had church once a month.

"When a slave died evvybody on our plantation quit wuk 'til atter the buryin'. The home-made coffins was made of unpainted planks and they was lined with white cloth. White folks' coffins was made the same way, only theirs was stained, but they never tuk time to stain the ones they buried slaves in. Graves was dug wide at the top and at the bottom they was just wide enough to fit the coffin. They laid planks 'crost the coffins and they shovelled in the dirt. They never had larnt to read the songs they sung at funerals and at meetin'. Them songs was handed down from one generation to another and, far as they knowed, never was writ down. A song they sung at the house 'fore they left for the graveyard begun:[Pg 187]

'Why do we mourn departed friends,
Or shake at death's alarm.'"

At the grave they sung, Am I Born to Die, To Lay this Body Down?

"Slaves on our plantation never thought about runnin' off to no North. Marse Robert allus treated 'em fair and square, and thar warn't no need for 'em to run nowhar. That foreman of his, Robert Scott, did go off and stay a few days once. Marse Robert had started to whip his wife and he had jumped 'twixt 'em; that made Marse Robert so mad he run to the house to git his gun, so the foreman he got out of the way a day or two to keep from gittin' shot. When he come back, Marse Robert was so glad to git him back he never said a word to him 'bout leavin'.

"On Saddays the women wuked in the field 'til dinnertime, but the menfolks wuked on 'til a hour 'fore sundown. The women spent that time washin', cleanin' up the cabins, patchin', and gittin' ready for the next week. Oh! How they did frolic 'round Sadday night when they could git passes. Sundays they went to church but not without a pass for, if they ever was cotch out without one, them paterollers would beat 'em up something terrible.

"Sho, Christmastime was when slaves had their own fun. Thar warn't nothin' extra or diffunt give 'em,[Pg 188] only plenty to eat and drink; Marse Robert allus made lots of whiskey and brandy. He give his slaves six days holiday and 'lowed 'em to have passes. They frolicked, danced, and visited 'round and called it havin' a good time. Wuk begun again on New Year's Day and thar warn't no more holidays 'til the next Christmas. No,

mam, not many slave chillun knowed what Santa Claus was or what Christmas was meant to celebrate 'til they got some schoolin' atter the war was over.

"Sho, sho, us had cornshuckin's, all right enough. Sometimes Marse Robert raised so much corn us had to have more than one cornshuckin' to git it all shucked. The neighbors was 'vited and such a time as us did have atter the wuk was done. I was too little to do so much eatin', drinkin', and cuttin' the buck as the older ones done. 'Cuttin' the buck' is what I calls the kind of frolics they had atter they got full of liquor.

"Yes, mam, they had dances all right. That's how they got mixed up with the paterollers. Negroes would go off to dances and stay out all night; it would be wuk time when they got back, and they went to the field and tried to keep right on gwine, but the Good Lord soon cut 'em down. You couldn't talk to folks that tried to git by with things lak that; they warn't[Pg 189] gwine to do no diffunt, nohow. When they ain't 'cepted at St. Peter's gate, I'se sho they's gwine to wish they had heeded folks that talked to 'em and tried to holp 'em.

"Weddin's? Didn't you know slaves didn't have sho'nough weddin's? If a slave man saw a girl to his lakin' and wanted her to make a home for him, he just axed her owner if it was all right to take her. If the owner said 'yes' then the man and girl settled down together and behaved theyselves. If the girl lived on one plantation and the man on another that was luck for the girl's marster, 'cause the chillun would belong to him.

"Right now I can't call to mind nothin' us played when I was a chap but marble games. Us made them marbles out of clay and baked 'em in the sun. Grown folks used to scare chillun 'bout Raw Head and Bloody Bones, but that was mostly to make chillun git still and quiet at night. I ain't never seed no ghost in my life, but I has heared a heap of sounds and warn't able to find out what made them noises.

"When slaves got sick Marse Robert was good enough to 'em; he treated 'em right, and allus sont for a doctor, 'specially when chillun was borned. Oil, turpentine, and salts was the medicines the doctors give the most of to slaves. 'Fore they was sick enough to[Pg 190] send for the doctor the homefolks often give sick folks boneset and life-everlastin' teas, and 'most evvybody wore a little sack of asafetida 'round their necks to protect 'em from diseases.

"When freedom come I was down in the lower end of Clarke County on Marse George Veal's plantation whar Marse Robert had done sont Miss Martha and the chillun and part of the slaves too. My white folks was fleein' from the Yankees. Marse Robert couldn't come 'long 'cause he had done been wounded in battle and when they sont him home from the war he couldn't walk. I don't know what he said to the slaves that was left thar to 'tend him, but I heared tell that he didn't tell 'em nothin' 'bout freedom, leastwise not for sometime. Pretty soon the Yankees come through and had the slaves come together in town whar they had a speakin' and told them Negroes they was free,

and that they didn't belong to nobody no more. Them Yankees said orders for that pernouncement had come from the President of the United States, Mr. Abraham Lincoln, and they said that Mr. Lincoln was to be a father to the slaves atter he had done freed 'em.

"It warn't long then 'fore Marse Robert sont my pa to fetch Miss Martha and her chillun, and the slaves too, back to the old plantation. Pa wuked for him 'til June of the next year and then rented a farm[Pg 191] on shares.

"I heared 'bout night-riders, but I never seed none of 'em. It was said they tuk Negroes out of their cabins and beat 'em up jus' 'cause they belonged to the Negro race. Negroes was free but they warn't 'lowed to act lak free people. Three months atter the war, schools was opened up here for Negroes and they was in charge of Yankee teachers. I can't call back the name of the Yankee woman that taught me.

"It was several years before no Negroes was able to buy land, and thar was just a few of 'em done it to start with. Negroes had to go to school fust and git larnin' so they would know how to keep some of them white folks from gittin' land 'way from 'em if they did buy it.

"Slavery time customs had changed a good bit when I married Ella Strickland. Us had a common little home affair at her ma's house. I never will forgit how Ella looked that day in her dove-colored weddin' dress; it was made with a plain, close-fittin' waist that had pretty lace 'round the neck and sleeves. Her skirt was plaited, and over it was draped a overskirt that was edged with lace. The Good Lord gave us seven children, but three of 'em He has taken from the land of the livin'. Us still has two boys and two girls.[Pg 192] Sam wuks at a big clubhouse in Washington, D.C., and his four chillun are the onliest grandchillun me and Ella's got, so far as us knows. Charlie's job is at the Pennsylvania Station. Both of our daughters is teachers; one of 'em teaches at the Union Baptist School, here in Athens, and the other's at a school in Statesboro, Georgia. Yes, mam, Ella's still livin', but she is bad off with her foots. If the Lord lets us both live 'til this comin' December, us will celebrate our 53rd. Weddin' anniversary.

"Now that its all been over more than 70 years and us is had time to study it over good, I thinks it was by God's own plan that President Abraham Lincoln sot us free, and I can't sing his praises enough. Miss Martha named me for Jeff Davis, so I can't down him when I'se got his name; I was named for him and Benjamin Franklin too. Oh! Sho, I'd ruther be free and I believes the Negroes is got as much right to freedom as any other race, 'deed I does believe that.

"Why did I jine the church? 'Cause I was converted by the power of the Holy Spirit. I thinks all people ought to be 'ligious, to be more lak Christ; He is our Saviour. I'se been in the church 53 years and 'bout 52 of them years I'se been a-preachin'. I went one year to the Atlanta Baptist College to git[Pg 193] my trainin' for the ministry, and I would

have gone back, but me and Ella got married. I'se been pastor of the Friendship Baptist Church 48 years. In all, I'se been pastor of eight churches; I'se got three regular churches now."

A Negro boy came to the door and asked Jeff to tell him about some work. As Jeff arose he said: "If you is through with me, I'll have to go now and holp this boy. I'se 'titled to one of them books with my story in it free, 'cause I'se a preacher, and I knows I'se give you the best story you has wrote up yit."