WHEELER GRESHAM of WILKES COUNTY GEORGIA

by

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Wheeler Gresham, 82 years old, tall, very erect, has white hair and beard, a quiet dignified manner, and faded old eyes that seem ever to be gazing back on those happy days he told about "when we war' in slavery." He is uneducated, having gone to school only one week in his life—gave up "tryin' to larn out er books."

Wheeler claims the distinction of having had three masters and loving them all equally well; he belonged to one and lived with the other two. It all happened in this wise:

His mother, Barbara Booker, belonged to "Marse Simmie and Marse Jabie Booker"—("Marse Simmie wuz the one what named me") his father, Franklin Gresham belonged to "Marse George Gresham." The Bookers and Greshams lived on adjoining plantations and were the best of friends and neighbors. They would not sell a slave no matter what happened, so when Barbara and Franklin wanted to marry they had the consent of their owners and settled down on the Booker plantation where Barbara continued her work and Franklin spending all his spare time with her, although he belonged to the Greshams and kept up his work for them. He had a pass to go and come as he pleased.

Wheeler tells of his life on the plantations for his time was spent between the two where he played with the other little slaves and with the white boys near his age. He enjoyed most[Pg 68] playing marbles, hunting and fishing with the little Gresham boys. He never has had a punishment of any kind in all his whole long life, and said with much pride—"An' I ain't never been in no court scrape neither. No'm, my Marsters didn't 'low nobody ter 'buke dey han's. Ef a overseer got rough an' wanted to beat a nigger, he had to go right den and dar." He added: "Dem overseer fellows wuz rough anyhow, dey warn't our sort of folks. An' de owners what wuz mean to dey niggers wuz looked down on by 'spectable white folks lak dem what I belonged to."

"All us little niggers on the Booker plantation et in de white folks' kitchen, a big old kitchen out in de yard. De grown slaves cooked and et in dey cabins, but our Mistess

wouldn't trust 'em to feed de little ones. My Gramma wuz de cook an' we had plenty of good victuals, we'd all set er round an' eat all we wanted three times er day."

Wheeler said that the Doctor who lived near by was always called in when the negroes were sick and they had the best of care; their owners saw to that. Of course there were simple home remedies like mullein tea for colds, Jerusalem Oak seed crushed up and mixed with syrup, given to them in the Springtime, and always that terrible "garlic warter" they so despised to take.

When death came the slave was buried on the plantation in[Pg 69] the negro burial ground, a white preacher conducting the last rites. When a negro couple wanted to marry the consent of the owners was ceremony enough and they set up a home as man and wife and lived on "'thout all dis 'vocin' lak dey has terday."

Christmas was a big time with three or four days holiday on the plantations. Santa Claus found his way to the Quarters and left the little negroes stick candy and "reisens", and "dar wuz er plenty of pound cake fer everybody." Fourth of July was a big holiday and all the little boys white and black went a-fishing together that day.

Sundays were kept holy—no work was done on the Sabbath. On "meetin' days" everybody attended the neighborhood Church, white and black worshiped together, the darkies in the gallery built for them. On all other Sundays they went to Church, and everybody sat in one big Bible Class. Wheeler said his Mistess called up all the little negroes on the plantation on Sunday afternoons and taught them the catechism and told them Bible stories.

There was plenty of fun for the darkies in the Gresham and Booker community. They had dances, cornshuckings, picnics and all kinds of old time affairs. These were attended by slaves for some distance around, but they had to have passes or "de patter rollers would sho' git 'em. Us little niggers wuz feared to go 'bout much 'kase we heered so much erbout de patter rollers." Wheeler enjoyed the cornshuckings more than anything else, or[Pg 70] rather he talked more freely about them. He said that the corn was piled high in the barn and the men and boys, after a big supper of "fresh meat and all kinds of good things, and plenty of sho' nough pound cake"—(that pound cake he can't seem to forget)—would gather around and to the tune of an old fiddle in the hands of a plantation musician, they would sing and shuck corn until the whole pile was finished. Many races were entered into and the winners proclaimed amid much shouting and laughter. This merriment and work lasted into the night.

Wheeler was quick to say that the happiest time of his life was those days of slavery and the first years immediately after. He was happy, had all that anyone needed, was well taken care of in every way. He spoke of their family as being a happy one, of how they worked hard all day, and at night were gathered around their cabin fire where the little folks played, and his mother spun away on her "task of yarn". His Mistess made

all his clothes, "good warm ones, too." All the little negroes played together and there "wuz a old colored lady" that looked after them "an' kept 'em straight."

There was little talk of the war, in fact some of the slaves didn't know what "de white folks wuz er fightin' 'bout." Wheeler's two Booker masters, "Marse Simmie and Marse Jabie, went to de war, Marse Jabie wuz kilt dar." Very little difference was noticed in the plantation life—of course times were harder and there was a sadness around, but work went on as usual. When the war was over and the slaves called up and told they were free: "Sum wuz[Pg 71] glad an' sum wuz sorry, dey all wuz at a wonder—at de row's en', didn't know whar ter go. De most of 'em stayed on lak we wuz, workin' fer our white folks. Dat's what my Pa an' Ma done, dey stayed on fer sometime after de war." Wheeler tells about a few Yankees coming through the country after the war: "Us niggers wuz all 'feared of 'em an' we run frum 'em, but dey didn't do nothin' to nobody. I dunno what dey cum er 'round down here fer."

Wheeler said he "nuver paid signs no mind—nuver paid no 'tention to all dem 'stitions an' sich lak." He didn't have any superstitions to tell only he did hear "ef a screech owl fly 'cross yo' do' hits er sign of a death in dat house, an' ef a whippowill calls at de' do' hit's er sign of death. Dat's what folks say, I don't know nothin' 'bout hit."

"I'm glad I knowed slavery, I had er better livin' in dem days dan I eber had since. No talk 'bout money in dem days—no mam, an' ef a doctor wuz needed he wuz right dar. I'se livin' ter day 'kase I got sich a good start, an' den too, I'se livin' on de days of my Pa and Ma. Dey wuz good folks an' lived ter be old. An' den too, I'se allus lived on a farm, ain't nuver knowed no t'other kind of life, an' dat's de healthiest and freest way ter live."

And, maybe, this gray old son of the soil is right—who knows?