

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers*, May 30, 1891 to February 6, 1892)

The Old Slave Days in Northern Kentucky

Uncle Wash had been the "Squire" at the village of Jessieville for many years. His house stood fronting a lawn, spotted with locust trees and fire enough from the turnpike to be free from its dust. (It was an "l" shaped two-story building, with no architectural adornment other than that given by the columns of a portico; but it was comfortable and roomy with one or more spare rooms generally occupied by welcome guests.)

Between two Locust trees on the lawn was a rude bench, and several chairs borrowed from the house, but left to stay out in the rain and shine until (some) necessity (indoors) required them to be taken back. This was the favorite loitering place of Jessieville; where the young whittled sticks and sometimes the bench in lieu thereof; especially the subject of horses was retailed, and discussions were had on the other favorite topic of the country Kentuckian, questions of law, which if not learned were animated. In all legal debates Uncle Wash was the leader. He was also the judge, for did anyone have the hardihood to dissent from his opinion, when he chose to express it decisively, he would go to the house and return with a leather bound book, from which he would read, and no one would further (thereupon) dispute him.

Uncle Wash had a number of slaves, who in the free and easy life of the farm lived a happy and careless existence.

His wife, Aunt Betsy, was an invalid (and) nearly blind, and as Uncle Wash was not a man to bother himself about trifles, the slave women were almost absolute in his household matters, and the men did more toward managing the farm than they should.

Among the slaves was Aunt Jennie, supposed to be between eighty and ninety years old. Jennie occupied a cabin by herself in a corner of the farm; and was practically free, (as no service was expected of her, although Uncle Wash had never taken the trouble to make out "free papers"). She had been brought from Africa when a child and was quite an aristocrat, priding herself on her freedom and her sure dissent. "I'm a full blooded (***)," she would say. "No pore white trash in me."

I was not a favorite with Aunt Jennie for I provoked her to often with boyish taunts, disputing her title to freedom, just to see her vexation. She was a miser. Her cabin was filled with a horde of miscellaneous trash, among which I

remember a tin cup with the bottom gone, a pair of tongs with half of one leg missing, and bacon hanging from the rafters almost dried to leather. Anything which any village matron was willing to give away was begged by Jennie.

Nigger Mary was the housekeeper, generally obliging, but of a violent temper, vented against white or black when she was aroused.

She had a great antipathy to "Little" Wash as he was called to distinguish him from his father. Her dislike was on account of the numerous justifiable punishments which little Wash had surreptitiously inflicted on her 10-year-old twin daughters Sev* and Ceaser. Very imps of Satan these two little black girls were, the similarity of their appearance aiding them too much mischief. With the free run of the house, they ransacked the rooms of visitors, for no inside door had a lock, and they caused me as much vexation with their liberties with my boyish property, as I inflicted on Aunt Jennie with doubts as to her freedom. My favorite among the slaves was Aunt Lucy the cook. She was light colored and portly, dignified, grave and gentle with a habitual sad expression. She had a son Ben, "Nigger Ben," he was generally spoken of in Jessieville except to his face and then he was merely called Ben. I suppose that Nigger Ben as well as Nigger Mary had their prefixes to distinguish them from white people in the neighborhood, for nearly every one was called by his Christian name up to middle age.

Ben had the dignity of character of his mother. The modern prohibition craze had not yet reached Jessieville, but Ben was a total abstainer and the only adult male in the country (about) who was. He was the principal servant on the farm and looked after his master's interests as if they were his own. I always noticed that Uncle Wash treated him with as much deference as he would a white man, and Uncle Wash had very courteous manners.

His tone was (also) kindly when he spoke to Aunt Lucy. I used to think it was because of the remembrance of having sold Ben's older brother Sam to the distant Missouri. Uncle Wash was in financial straits and the time for paying notes came due and money had to be raised somehow. Sam was the most valuable servant on the farm, and would bring more than any two others who could be spared. Ben was growing up and could soon, as he (eventually) did, fill his place. So Uncle Wash keeping his own counsel, had Sam drive him into town. The sale had already been made several days before, but they say when Uncle Wash returned to Jessieville, and Aunt Lucy was told what happened, she nearly broke her heart. She said that if Mas'r Wash had only told her, so that she could have kissed her boy goodbye she would not have cared.

When she looked saddest, she sometimes asked me to tell her about St. Louis and Missouri; and as at school I was pretty good in geography I would tell her all

that Mitchell's textbook gave about these places. "Missouri is bounded on the north by Iowa" – "What is bounded Chile?"

"On the East by Illinois, Kentucky and Tennessee"

What! Is Missouri that near Kentucky? And her countenance fell when told that although next to Kentucky, it was 300 miles from Jessierville. There were other slaves young and old at Uncle Wash's, but it is not necessary to mention them.

The kitchen which Aunt Lucy was mistress of, was a longhouse detached from the big house some twenty paces. It had no cooking stove for Aunt Lucy was firm in refusing to have one, saying she would not know how to use it. There was a great open stone fire place with a swinging iron crane to hang pots and kettles on, and the baking was done in iron skillets on the hearth, about which Lucy skillfully shoveled ashes and embers from the wood fire, with just heat enough to make a quick or slow bake, as she required.

(Lucy could prepare a grand feast on gala occasions. I thought that no cook could excel her, and used to wonder why Uncle Wash brought up the subject of the stove so often, when it could not be possible to prepare a finer feast than came from Lucy's skillets; and concluded that Uncle Wash simply did not want his household to be considered behind the times, as all the neighbors had stoves.) On Saturday nights the kitchen was the rendezvous for all the slaves of the neighborhood. I recall on Saturday night, myself and little Wash dropped in at the nigger's merrymaking. When we entered a goodly number had assembled, but the fun had not commenced. Those present chatted the gossip of their white owners as well as that of their own race. As we were only boys our presence was no restraint. To jet black bucks were seated astride a short bench playing cards, by the light of a tallow candle stuck in a bottle and placed in the window ledge above them. They were very intent on their game and threw down the cards in making their plays, with unnecessary force.

A boy about 14 years, of the same color as the card players, intently watched the game. He was clothed in a white man's cast off suit. The sleeves of the coat were rolled back to allow the hands to protrude. Likewise the bottoms of the trousers were tucked well up, and the tail of the broad backed coat almost touched the ground. The young black boy was no better than many white people who watch games of cards, for he suddenly called out to one of the players, "Play dat King of hearts." He that was spoken to was just raising a card to play it, but he paused to turn his indignation at the offender and with withering contempt ask, "Who is you?"

In ignorance of having done anything wrong the small boy in the large clothes took the question literally and answered sincerely and with perfect simplicity, "I don't know who I is, my name is John."

With an expression of disgust, the player finished his play with extra force in slamming down the card. Pretty soon the door open slightly and a stentorian voice roared a greeting. "Well folks how is you? How you like dat," and at the same time a dusky hand, thrust through the partly open door, flourished a jug of whiskey at the crowd. Then a face of shape and color like unto a frying pan and beaming with a broad smile peered in.

The shout of welcome attested the popularity of McAfee's Austin. The giant in dingy white cotton shirt, sun burned trousers (held up by one suspender) and well worn shoes with soles twisted up at the sides, powdered with the dust of a 3 mile walk on the turnpike, advanced to the middle of the room, with a heel and toe shuffle, and holding aloft the jug in one hand and a fiddle in the other, cut a few steps of a jig to a song of his own (***) , in which the refrain of the chorus was taken up by one and another, with the patting of knees and tapping of heels, and some musical voices, which was ended by Austin bringing the flat of his extended foot with violence to the floor, is a signal that the overture was concluded. The jug was passed around. Austin tuned his fiddle and played all his music to quick time, with short notes and using only long ones at the finales. There were walks around and songs and Dr. Gaines' Amanda and Maj. Cory's Jim, who were engaged to be married, advanced to the middle of the floor to dance each other down.

Austin occasionally handed the fiddle to another performer and took the floor himself. On one of these occasions his mouth while singing made a large red hole in his circular black face, which tempted the demon of mischief in one of the youngsters who was standing against the wall munching a chunk of corn bread. With accurate aim he threw the bread into Austin's mouth. Austin's song and dance stopped immediately. He sputtered a moment until the cornbread was well out of his mouth and then in indignation raised his voice. "Look' ee hyar, I'd give a half dollar to know who done frowed dat piece of bread in my mouf, and look'ee hyar, if you think I'm going to stand here and be imposed on you is mightily mistaken," and raising his voice as his wrath increased and shaking his extended fist, "I just want to say to dat unregenerated young rascalion, and to de old folks who is sponsible for his conduct, if I can't be treated wid de 'spect due to my age, I'll take my fiddle and go home."

Here a chorus of voices protested that he should not blame the entire party for the act of an individual. Austin paused as he took up his hat, somewhat mollified by the earnestness of the protestations, and with less of ire in his voice said, "My Eliza didn't want me to come here no how; she allowed I'se got to preach tomorrow and it would look better to do my fiddling at home." But the voice of protestation was again raised and the offending a little nigger, now as pale as the ink in a family ink stand, was ignominiously collared and thrust out. The cloud passed away from Austin's usually beaming face and the merriment proceeded.

But the happy days a Jessieville we're nearing their end, for the war between the sections brought discussion between the people of the village. Uncle Wash hoisted the stars and stripes on his house. The neighbors threatened to tear down the flag. He let it be understood that two guns were kept loaded to salute the man who should make the attempt, and although Uncle Wash was never known to have a quarrel with a man, he was of powerful physique and said his words so determinedly that no one troubled his flag. As the war progressed some of the slaves ran away. And Lucy and Nigger Ben disappeared first. I knew they went to search for Sam. I hope they found him but I never heard.

Aunt Betsy died, Uncle Wash's prestige as the leading man in Jessieville was gone, and the bench under the locusts was deserted. Uncle Wash sold the farm at a sacrifice, told Nigger Mary, Sev* and Ceaser and the other servants, who yet remained, to go in their ways, and himself departed to end his days with one of his sons settled in Indiana.

Some years after the Civil War, I was with a friend at the hotel in Nicholasville. It was a Sunday summer night, after church hours, clear moonlight and very quiet save for a noise coming from the outskirts of the town. As the stillness of nature increased the noise grew louder and we walked toward it to see what was the matter. It was soon apparent that it was a protracted meeting in a colored church. We entered and took a back seat. The preacher was clerically dressed in a suit of black, a beaver hat, worn brown, rested on the well pounded pulpit. He was of the kind called "powerful," and his rousing exhortations to sinners gained much affect from his gigantic frame, and a stentorian voice which came from a large mouth in a round black face. Three women were in convulsions on the floor below the pulpit and joined their screams to the shouts of the congregation and the roaring of the preacher. "White folks and black folks," he yelled " , wallow in the dust like dese fine women."

This caused a lot of young people not devoutly disposed to turn to the two white folks in the back seats and laugh out loud; which excited the anger of the minister and he said, "I call upon all the good people of dis congregation to come forward to the front seats and keep away from dem contaminated people."

"And lookee hyar," he said, shaking his fist at the offenders. "I jist want to tell you one thing; if I can't teach you 'ligion, I'se gwine to teach you manners."

There was no doubt of the identity of the preacher with my old acquaintance, McAfee's Austin of the slave days, and next morning I had the pleasure of shaking hands with the Rev. Austin McAfee.

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