The Price of Freedom

*A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, A Native of Africa*

Since their arrival on American soil, natives of Africa, now Black slaves, have grown accustomed to racial discrimination and the life long journey through the tragedy of slavery. Unknown to this country called America, many Africans were taken from their native land, and stripped of their freedoms as human beings. In pursuit of freedom, many Blacks rebelled against slavery and by any means tried to regain their freedom. Many blacks tried escaping, buying back their rights as human beings, and even lost their lives trying to reclaim freedom.

Given the opportunity to buy back his freedom, Venture Smith shares his story in, A *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, A Native of Africa,* about his journey to freedom and the obstacles faced to buy back his free will. A previous slave by the name of Olaudah Equiano also expressed his journey through slavery in his story, *Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano.* His troubles through slavery were similar to those in Venture’s narrative and he too was able to buy his freedom in 1766 and also launched his own business career. Unwilling to remain oppressed by the terrors of slavery, these two African natives fought back and became free men.

Similar to the stories of many Africans taken from their native land, Venture Smith discusses how his homeland was invaded and how he was taken to America as a prisoner of slavery and sold without the slightest regards for what was left behind. Watching his father die at the hands of these invaders, and leaving his home behind, Venture grew strong in his work as a slave and remained careful in hopes of one day earning his freedom. During his time as a slave, Venture worked rigorously day and night, earning money which he saved towards freedom. At this time he also met and married another slave and started a family with her, only to be sold and separated by his White master. This only strengthening his will to survive and gain freedom, Venture he was able to buy back his freedom and reconnect his family after years of being oppressed as a slave. Although Venture suffered the severities of slavery he was still able to reclaim ownership of his life and was fortunate enough to regain his family, which was very rare at this time.

Included in various slave narratives, previous slaves all share the similar story of struggle and horror. These stories identified the realities of torture, rape, beatings, and in most cases death. In his narrative Venture explained, “...I was putting on a log in the fire-place, not suspecting harm from any one, I received a most violent stroke on the crown of my head with a club two feet long and as large round as a chair-post. This blow very badly wounded my head, and the scar remains to this day” (Smith pg.178). Under no circumstance should any person be beaten for a reason so insignificant that he almost loses consciousness. Venture shares this story to prove how badly an obedient and respectful man of color is treated in the realm of slavery. Just like Venture, previous slave Elizabeth Keckley also bought her own freedom in 1855 and shared her appalling journey to freedom. Described in her narrative, *Behind the Scenes; or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House,* Keckley was flogged or most commonly known as whipped for absolutely no reason at all. She was then forced to strip naked and was beaten repeatedly until she bled. Her torture explained:

With steady hand and practiced eye he would raise the instrument of torture, nerve himself for a blow, and with fearful force the rawhide descended upon the quivering flesh. It cut the skin, raised great welts, and the warm blood tricked down my back. Oh God! I can feel the torture now—the terrible, excruciating agony of those moments. I did not scream; I was too proud to let my tormentor know what I was suffering (Keckley pg. 34).

In this passage it is clear that Keckley’s experiences as a slave were both traumatic and unjust. Through these narratives, readers are able to understand the severity of slavery and can recognize the pride in which slaves had to overcome it.

While enduring the hardship of slavery, Venture did attempt to escape slavery. Alongside Heddy, an Irish slave, He, venture, and a few others set out this plan to escape. In the attempt to leave behind Venture the others, Heddy tries to further his escape but fails. Smart in his will to survive, Venture goes back to his master telling him that Heddy forced him to go with him as his accomplice so that he would not be punished for this escape (Smith pg. 177). Fortunately for Venture, he was able to return to work as a slave without consequence. Many slaves during this time were often punished for trying to escape and more commonly were killed. Infamous for trying to escape slavery but was unsuccessful, Nat Turner, was killed in the name of freedom. In the story described as the resurrection of Nat Turner, Kenneth Greensburg’s *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, explains how Nat Turner was known as the leader of one of the United States most famous failed slave rebellions, and was captured, skinned, and hanged in 1831 (pg. 18). Unlike Venture, Turner lost his life after trying to escape slavery. The fact that he was skinned then hanged shows that whites at this time wanted to make an example out of Turner, showing other slaves what would happen to them if they too tried to escape.

Whether they escaped or paid the price of freedom, the efforts of slaves to become free were ultimately done in vain. After slaves devoted their lives to becoming free, many of them remained plagued by racial discrimination and hardship. In the narrative of Venture, he was fortunate to buy his freedom but after he became a free man, nothing changed. While he was a slave, he learned the business of buying, selling and working for a profit in order to purchase his freedom. After he was freed that business remained with him as he began his life as a free man. He still worked as if he was a slave, buying, selling, and working for others, purchasing his sons, and other slaves. He worked intensively until he was sixty-nine years old. He said, “My freedom is a privilege which nothing else can equal. Notwithstanding all the losses I have suffered by fire, by the injustice of knaves, by the cruelty and oppression of false hearted friends, and the perfidy of my own countrymen whom I have assisted and redeemed from bondage” (pg. 185). Although Venture was a free man, he still encountered lost profits, the deeds of hard work, and cruelty from his peers. A free Negro man weathered down by the color of his skin.

Although many slaves were free, they were still heavily mistreated. Even after surviving slavery and rightfully earning freedom it didn’t change the fact that an ex-slave was once a slave, and would always be treated as one. In Frederick Douglass’ *My Bondage and My Freedom,* he believed that up until that time, a colored man was considered a fool if he even mentioned he was a runaway slave. An ex-slave would not only put himself in danger to being retaken but it was also frowned upon (pg. 454.) Runaway slaves, also known as fugitive slaves may have been freed in a sense but still lived in fear of losing their rights again. Douglass, who was a fugitive slave was at first apprehensive of telling his supporters that he was a fugitive slave, but ending up doing so anyway proving his worth as an educated Negro fighting for justice. Even after the Emancipation Proclamation in December 1865 which abolished slavery in its entirety, ex-slaves were still wrongfully treated, further proving that the price of freedom cannot be bought.

From the time that Blacks were imprisoned as American slaves, Blacks have adapted to the unjust color barrier that lies deeply in the foundation of America. After being taken from their native land, Africans have dedicated their lives to obtaining freedom. Although gaining freedom hardly qualified them equal to their white counterparts, Blacks never gave up. Whether they escaped, pain for, or died in the name of freedom, they remained optimistic.

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