

BACKGROUND: *Sojourner Truth was born Isabella Baumfree in 1797 in Ulster County, New York. Her parents, James and Elizabeth Baumfree were both enslaved by Johannes Hardenburgh. By the time she was thirteen, she had been sold four times—first from Charles Hardenbergh to John Neely, then to tavern keeper Martinus Schryver, then to John Dumont. She remained enslaved in the Dumont household until 1826. While in the Dumont household, Truth gave birth to two children—James and Diana—both of whom were fathered by her enslaver, John Dumont, against her will. Truth met and fell in love with a man, named Robert, who was enslaved on a neighboring farm. Robert’s enslaver disapproved of the relationship and beat Robert to death for sneaking out to meet Truth. Eventually she met an older man named Thomas, who she fell in love with and with whom she had three children.*

In 1799, New York passed a gradual emancipation law—children born after July 4, 1799, would be legally free after a period of twenty-five years for women and twenty-eight years for men. Those born before 1799, were legally deemed to be indentured servants, although in actuality, they remained enslaved for life. The state passed another law in 1817 that allowed for enslaved people born before 1799 to be freed on July 4, 1827.

Dumont promised to free Truth before the 1827 date, but then changed his mind. Truth, then, freed herself, taking her infant daughter Sophia with her. In 1826, in violation of the law, Dumont sold her son, Peter, south to Alabama. Truth spent the next two years searching for her son and working to gain his return. In 1828, the court ruled in Truth’s favor and ordered Peter brought back to New York, where he would be legally free and reunited with his mother.

After Truth gained her freedom, she became a well-known abolitionist who toured the nation spreading the gospel and denouncing slavery.

The following excerpts recount her experiences of forced separation and reunion.



HER BROTHERS AND SISTERS.

Isabella’s father was very tall and straight, when young, which gave him the name of ‘Bomefree’—low Dutch for tree—at least, this is SOJOURNER’S pronunciation of it—and by this name he usually went. The most familiar appellation of her mother was ‘Mau-mau Bett.’ She was the mother of some ten or twelve children; though Sojourner is far from knowing the exact number of her brothers and sisters; she being the youngest, save one, and all older than herself having been sold before her remembrance. She was privileged to behold six of them while she remained a slave.

Of the two that immediately preceded her in age, a boy of five years, and a girl of three, who were sold when she was an infant, she heard much; and she wishes that all who would fain believe that slave parents have not natural affection for their offspring could have listened as she did, while Bomefree and Mau-mau Bett,—their dark cellar lighted by a blazing pine-knot,—would sit for hours, recalling and recounting every endearing, as well as harrowing circumstance that taxed memory could supply, from the histories of those dear departed ones, of whom they had been robbed, and for whom their hearts still bled. Among the rest, they would relate how the little boy, on the last morning he was with them, arose with the birds, kindled a fire, calling for his Mau-mau to ‘come, for all was now ready for her’—little dreaming of the dreadful separation which was so near at hand, but of which his parents had an uncertain, but all the more cruel foreboding. There was snow on the ground, at the time of which we are speaking; and a large old-fashioned sleigh was seen to drive up to the door of the late Col. Ardinburgh. This event was noticed with childish pleasure by the unsuspecting boy; but when he was taken and put into the sleigh, and saw his little sister actually shut and locked into the sleigh box, his eyes were at once opened to their intentions; and, like a frightened deer he sprang from the sleigh, and running into the house, concealed himself under a bed. But this availed him little. He was re-conveyed to the sleigh, and separated for ever from those whom God had constituted his natural guardians and protectors, and who should have found him, in return, a stay and a staff to them in their declining years. But I make no comments on facts like these, knowing that the heart of every slave parent will make its own comments, involuntarily and correctly, as soon as each heart shall make the case its own. Those who are not parents will draw their conclusions from the promptings of humanity and philanthropy:—these, enlightened by reason and revelation, are also unerring.

Page 17

HER RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION.

Isabella and Peter, her youngest brother, remained, with their parents, the legal property of Charles Ardinburgh till his decease, which took place when Isabella was near nine years old.

After this event, she was often surprised to find her mother in tears; and when, in her simplicity, she inquired, ‘Mau-mau, what makes you cry?’ she would answer, ‘Oh, my child, I am thinking of your brothers and sisters that have been sold away from me.’ And she would proceed to detail many circumstances respecting them. But Isabella long since concluded that it was the impending fate of her only remaining children, which her mother but too well understood, even then, that called up those memories from the past, and made them crucify her heart afresh.

In the evening, when her mother’s work was done, she would sit down under the sparkling vault of heaven, and calling her children to her, would talk to them of the only Being that could effectually aid or protect them. Her teachings were delivered in Low Dutch, her only language, and, translated into English, ran nearly as follows:—

‘My children, there is a God, who hears and sees you.’ ‘A God, mau-mau! Where does he live?’ asked the children. ‘He lives in the sky,’ she replied; ‘and when you are beaten, or cruelly treated, or fall into any trouble, you must ask help of him, and he will always hear and help you.’ She taught them to kneel and say the Lord’s prayer. She entreated them to refrain from lying and stealing, and to strive to obey their masters.

ILLEGAL SALE OF HER SON.

A little previous to Isabel's leaving her old master, he had sold her child, a boy of five years, to a Dr. Gedney, who took him with him as far as New York city, on his way to England; but finding the boy too small for his service, he sent him back to his brother, Solomon Gedney. This man disposed of him to his sister's husband, a wealthy planter, by the name of Fowler, who took him to his own home in Alabama.

This illegal and fraudulent transaction had been perpetrated some months before Isabella knew of it, as she was now living at Mr. Van Wagener's. The law expressly prohibited the sale of any slave out of the State,—and all minors were to be free at twenty-one years of age; and Mr. Dumont had sold Peter with the express understanding, that he was soon to return to the State of New York, and be emancipated at the specified time.

When Isabel heard that her son had been sold South, she immediately started on foot and alone, to find the man who had thus dared, in the face of all law, human and divine, to sell her child out of the State; and if possible, to bring him to account for the deed.

Arriving at New Paltz, she went directly to her former mistress, Dumont, complaining bitterly of the removal of her son. Her mistress heard her through, and then replied—'Ugh! a fine fuss to make about a little n-----! Why, haven't you as many of 'em left as you can see to and take care of? A pity 'tis, the n----- are not all in Guinea!! Making such a halloo-balloo about the neighborhood; and all for a paltry n-----!!!' Isabella heard her through, and after a moment's hesitation, answered, in

tones of deep determination—'I'll have my child again.' 'Have your child again!' repeated her mistress—her tones big with contempt, and scorning the absurd idea of her getting him. 'How can you get him? And what have you to support him with, if you could? Have you any money?' 'No,' answered Bell, 'I have no money, but God has enough, or what's better! And I'll have my child again.' These words were pronounced in the most slow, solemn and determined measure and manner. And in speaking of it, she says, 'Oh, my God! I know'd I'd have him agin. I was sure God would help me to get him. Why, I felt so tall within—I felt as if the power of a nation was with me!'

The impressions made by Isabella on her auditors, when moved by lofty or deep feeling, can never be transmitted to paper, (to use the words of another,) till by some Daguerrian art, we are enabled to transfer the look, the gesture, the tones of voice, in connection with the quaint, yet fit expressions used, and the spirit-stirring animation that, at such a time, pervades all she says.

After leaving her mistress, she called on Mrs. Gedney, mother of him who had sold her boy; who, after listening to her lamentations, her grief being mingled with indignation at the sale of her son, and her declaration that she would have him again—said, 'Dear me! What a disturbance to make about your child! What, is your child better than my child? My child is gone out there, and yours is gone to live with her, to have enough of everything, and to be treated like a gentleman!' And here she laughed at Isabel's absurd fears, as she would represent them to be. 'Yes,' said Isabel, 'your child has gone there, but she is married and my boy has gone as a slave, and he is too little to go so far from his mother. Oh, I must have

Page 46

my child.' And here the continued laugh of Mrs. G. seemed to Isabel, in this time of anguish and distress, almost demoniacal. And well it was for Mrs. Gedney, that, at that time, she could not even dream of the awful fate awaiting her own beloved daughter, at the hands of him whom she had chosen as worthy the wealth of [illegible] love and confidence, and in whose society her young heart had calculated on a happiness, purer and more elevated than was ever conferred by a kingly crown. But, alas! she was doomed to disappointment, as we shall relate by and by. At this point, Isabella earnestly begged of God that he would show to those about her that He was her helper; and she adds, in narrating, 'And He did; or, if He did not show them, he did me.'