

SOME REMINISCENCES OF A LONG LIFE

By John Hooker 1899

When I was a boy there were several slaves left in Connecticut, though I do not now remember seeing one in Farmington. The legislature, in 1784, passed an act making all slaves born in the state after March 1, 1784, free on becoming twenty-five years of age, and in 1797 an act making all born after August 1, 1797, free at the age of twenty-one. Slavery was not absolutely abolished until 1848, at which time there were only six slaves surviving. There must have been in my boyhood quite a number, as in 1830 one needed to be only fifty-six years old to be a slave.

Probably many had been emancipated. But though I do not remember to have seen any slaves, I used occasionally to hear some of the old slaveholders tell about their experiences under the system. Gad Cowles kept the principal store in Farmington. He must have been born about 1780, and lived to be about seventy-five years old. I remember his telling about his going after a slave to Hudson on the Hudson River, which was a great port for landing cargoes of slaves as they were brought in. He bought a stout, finely-built black man, about twenty years old, and, putting a rope around his neck, tied the end of it to his saddle, and, as he said, trotted him all the way home." He described him as a man he could not trust. "Why" said he, "I was one day going to give the fellow a sound whipping with a cart whip, and made him stand off so that I could get a good sweep of the whip, when the rascal ran away, and it was two weeks before I caught him again."

A very grotesque incident occurred about this time at Gad Cowles's store. Farmington was not only the center of a large trade with all the surrounding towns, but Gad's store, as I have said, was the principal one in the village. It was in a large brick block of two stories and a high attic. Each story and the cellar were filled with his goods, the attic being devoted to agricultural implements. One day in the early summer a young man from Burlington came to the store to buy some farming tools, and Gad sent him up to the attic to pick them out for himself.

There was a trap door in the floor of the attic, with another directly beneath it in the story below. These both opened upwards, but they were old and a good deal worn. The Burlington man, in walking about in his stumbling way, came upon the upper trapdoor, which gave way under him, and let him down upon the next trapdoor, which, in turn, gave way and let him headlong down into the store below. Gad was at the time waiting on a lady customer, when the man came down upon them, striking a nest of brass kettles, and bending them out of shape, besides breaking his own ribs, as well as seriously injuring himself internally. Gad, who was an irascible man, swore at him for his stupidity, and said he wished there had been another trapdoor that opened into hell. However, he was a very kindly man, and when he saw how badly the man was hurt, he had him taken over to his own house, where he kept him for half a year before he was well enough to be taken home. He had a long course of illness, and came very near to his death. At last, about midwinter, it was thought it would be safe to take him home, and his brother, who was stone deaf, came with an open farm sled and a pair of horses, a feather bed and blankets being laid upon the sleigh, that he might lie comfortable and be kept warm.

There was a good deal of snow on the ground, but a warm rain had softened it all and filled the brooks and ditches with froth.

On the way home the brother drove through one these brooks to water his horses. On getting to the gate at home he called out to his two sisters to come and help get his brother in. They came rushing out, and when they got to the sleigh they said, "Where is he?" The brother twisted around to get a back look, and saw at once that the sleigh was empty. All were horrified, and the brother drove back on the road as fast as he could. When he reached the brook where he had watered his horses, he found the invalid lying in the water, with his head just out of it, but wet through and almost frozen. He was taken home, where he had a course of fever, which it took him till the next summer to recover from. With the warm weather of summer the poor man was able to get out and walk about a little in the sunshine. Just after he began to venture out he went to a neighbor's, where they were about to hang a good-sized dog. Their barn was on a hillside, with the roof on the backside coming to the ground, and a high front on the other side. The dog had a rope around his neck, which was brought over the ridge of the roof and fastened to one of those frames that the joiners nail on such roofs when they are shingling. Our invalid wanted very much to see the whole proceeding, and climbed up to the ridge of the roof, where he could see the dog pushed off and hanging by the rope. But alas, just as the dog was pushed off, and his weight pulled heavily on the rope, the wooden frame flew off and caught the poor man between the legs and carried him headlong over the high side of the roof. The dog escaped unhurt, but our invalid had some of his bones broken and was laid up for another long spell of illness. I never learned anything of his later history.

The practice of private watching with sick people was in vogue when I was a boy. I think such a thing as a trained nurse was unknown in Farmington, if anywhere else. No matter how desperately ill a person might be, his own family took care of him during the day, and the neighbors came, one after another, to watch at night. The family, during the day, would engage the watcher for the night. I think the service was always a neighborly gratuity, to be repaid in kind if there should be need. I remember being requested when I was fourteen to watch with Edward L. Hart, a schoolmate of about my own age, and a nephew of Simeon Hart, who kept the village academy, and with whom Edward made his home.

Edward was very sick with some kind of fever. I got to the house about nine o'clock, was instructed carefully as to the medicines to be given, and then was left alone for the night in the sick boy's room. There were two medicines to be given him alternately every half-hour, three drops of one and a teaspoonful of the other. I had an awful struggle with an almost overpowering drowsiness, but kept awake and faithful to my duties till about midnight. I was then administering the regular medicine, as I supposed, when Edward screamed out that I had given him the wrong medicine, and I found that I had given him a teaspoonful of that of which I should have given him three drops. I supposed I had killed him, and at once rushed up to Mr. Hart's room and burst in, exclaiming, "Oh, I have given Edward the wrong medicine." Mr. Hart sprang up and ran down stairs in his nightgown, and I explained at once what I had done. The boy, in the meantime, was bent up with pain. In a moment Mr. Hart gave him a strong alkali (the medicine was a sharp

acid), and the poor boy was at once in a state of wild explosion, enough to have strangled him, and it was a wonder how, in his weakness, he lived through the strain. His condition was now so critical that the family staid up and took charge of him for the rest of the night, and I went home and to bed. The doctor was sent for, and he said the treatment had apparently helped him by clearing the foul matter out of his stomach, and from that time he began to get better, and before long was well.

In connection with this matter of private watching, a good story is told of Governor Roger S. Baldwin when a young man. My grandfather, who lived in New Haven, was quite old and feeble, and friends of the family came at night to watch with him. Mr. Baldwin, who was a near relative, took his turn. He got there about bedtime, and the family explained to him fully about the different medicines, and went to bed, leaving him to his solitary watch. There were four different kinds of medicine, one to be given every quarter of an hour. Mr. Baldwin gave the old gentleman the first dose and then seated himself comfortably in a rocking-chair. Waiting for the next quarter-hour to come. As he sat waiting he suddenly opened his eyes and it was broad daylight. He sprang to the old gentleman's bedside, expecting to find him dead, but he was sound asleep. He woke him, and asked him how he felt. "Oh," said he, "what a refreshing sleep I have had." This was all the old gentleman needed, and he began to get better at once. Mr. Baldwin did not like to have his neglect of his patient known, and poured out into the slop-pail about as much as he would have used if all the medicine had been properly administered, and it was several years before the real facts became known. The family, who had no suspicion what had happened, were loud in their praise of Mr. Baldwin, as having benefited the old gentleman greatly by his faithful care of him.

There is a further incident that I have always remembered with much interest, and which is well worth preserving. Horace Cowles, in my youth, was one of the immovably upright men of the town. He had the public confidence in the highest degree as a man of probity. No man could settle an estate more intelligently or more honestly, and he was often employed in such services. But, with it all, he was not a popular man. He held very strong views as to the enforcement of laws against crime, and was unyielding in his views. End?

(Belknap & Warfield, Hartford CT 1899, submitted by Jan Tanner)