

Apprenticeship Life

Frederick Douglass, 1855

Ch. 20 of *My Bondage, My Freedom*

(<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/202/202-h/202-h.htm#link2HCH0020>)

Douglass was enslaved from his birth until 1838, when he escaped to freedom. This excerpt describes a time in 1836 when he was enslaved and worked alongside white and free black laborers and apprentices.

VERY soon after I went to Baltimore to live [1826-38], Master Hugh succeeded in getting me hired to Mr. William Gardiner, an extensive ship builder on Fell's Point. ... [M]y orders from Mr. Gardiner were to do whatever the carpenters commanded me to do. This was placing me at the beck and call of about seventy-five men. I was to regard all these as masters. Their word was to be my law. ... At times I needed a dozen pair of hands. ... Three or four voices would strike my ear at the same moment. It was, "Fred., come help me to [saw] this timber here." "Fred, come carry this timber yonder." "Fred., bring that roller here." "Fred., go get a fresh can of water." "Fred, come help saw off the end of this timber." "Fred., go quick and get the crow bar." ... "Fred., go to the blacksmith's shop, and get a new punch."... "Hurry, Fred! run and bring me a cold chisel." "I say, Fred., bear a hand, and get up a fire as quick as lightning under that steam-box." "Halloo, nigger! Come, turn this grindstone." "Come, come! move, move!" ... "I say, darky, blast your eyes, why don't you heat up some pitch?" ... "Come here!—Go there!—Hold on where you are! Damn you, if you move, I'll knock your brains out!"

... At the end of the eight months, Master Hugh refused ... to allow me to remain with Mr. Gardiner. The circumstance which led to his taking me away was a brutal outrage committed upon me by the white apprentices of the ship-yard. The fight was a desperate one, and I came out of it most shockingly mangled. I was cut and bruised in sundry places, and my left eye was nearly knocked out of its socket. The facts leading to this barbarous outrage upon me illustrate a phase of slavery destined to become an important element in the overthrow of the slave system

... . That phase is this: the conflict of slavery with the interests of the white mechanics and laborers of the south.

... The slaveholders, ... by encouraging the enmity of the poor, laboring white man against the blacks, succeed in making the white man almost as much a slave as the black slave himself. The difference between the white slave, and the black slave, is this: the latter belongs to *one* slaveholder, and the former belongs to *all* the slaveholders, collectively. The white slave has taken from him, by indirection, what the black slave has taken from him, directly, and without ceremony. Both are plundered, and by the same plunderers. The slave is robbed by his master, of all his earnings, above what is required for his bare physical necessities; and the white man is robbed by the slave system of the just results of his labor, because he is flung into competition with a class of laborers who work without wages.

... At present, the slaveholders blind them to this competition, by keeping alive their prejudice against the slaves... . They appeal to their pride, often denouncing emancipation as tending to place the white man on an equality with Negroes, and by this means they succeed in drawing off the minds of the poor whites from the real fact, that by the rich slave-master they are already regarded as but a single remove from equality with the slave. The impression is cunningly made, that slavery is the only power that can prevent the laboring white man from falling to the level of the slave's poverty and degradation. ...

... In the city... there are not unfrequent murmurs that educating the slaves to be mechanics may, in the end, give slavemasters power to dispense with the services of the poor white man altogether. But with characteristic dread of offending the slaveholders, these poor, white mechanics in Mr. Gardiner's ship-yard – instead of applying the natural, honest remedy for the apprehended evil, and objecting at once to work there by the side of slaves – made a cowardly attack upon the free colored mechanics, saying *they* were eating the bread which should be eaten by American freemen, and swearing that they would not work with them. The feeling was, really, against having their labor brought into competition with that of the colored people at all; but it was too much to strike directly at the interest of the slaveholders; and, therefore ... they dealt their blows on the poor, colored freeman... .

Until a very little before I went there, white and black ship carpenters worked side by side, in the ship yards... . Nobody seemed to see any impropriety in it. ... Some of the blacks were first-rate workmen, and were given jobs requiring highest skill. All at once, however, the white

carpenters knocked off, and swore that they would no longer work on the same stage with free Negroes. Taking advantage of the heavy contract resting upon Mr. Gardiner, to have the war vessels for Mexico ready to launch in July, and of the difficulty of getting other hands at that season of the year, they swore they would not strike another blow for him, unless he would discharge his free colored workmen.

Now, although this movement did not extend to me *in form*, it did reach me *in fact*. The spirit which it awakened was one of malice and bitterness, toward colored people *generally*, and I suffered with the rest, and suffered severely. My fellow apprentices very soon began to feel it to be degrading to work with me. They began to put on high looks, and to talk contemptuously and maliciously of “*the Niggers*,” saying, that “they would take the country,” that “they ought to be killed.” ...