

The spirits of Xmas:

Mind Enslavement found in a bottle, 1834-1971

By Frederick Douglass

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MY TERM of service with Edward Covey expired on Christmas Day, 1834. I gladly enough left him, although he was by this time as gentle as a lamb. My home for the next year, 1835, was already secured, my next master selected. There was always more or less excitement about changing hands, but determined to fight my way, I had become somewhat reckless and cared little into whose hands I fell.

THE REPORT got abroad that I was hard to whip; that I was guilty of kicking back, and that, though generally a good-natured Negro, I sometimes "got the devil in me." These sayings were rife in Talbot County and distinguished me among my servile brethren. Trained from the cradle up to think and feel that their masters were superiors and invested with a sort of sacredness, there were few who could rise above the control which that sentiment exercised. I had freed myself from it, and the thing was known. One bad sheep will spoil a whole flock. I was a bad sheep. I hated slavery, slaveholders, and all pertaining to them; and I did not fail to inspire others with the same feeling whenever the opportunity was presented.

The days between Christmas Day and New Year's were allowed the slaves as holidays. During these days all regular work was suspended, and there was nothing to do but keep fires and look after stock. We regarded this time as our own by the grace of our masters, and we therefore used it or abused it as we pleased.

The holidays were variously spend. The sober industrious ones would employ themselves in manufacturing cornbrooms, mats, horse-collars, and baskets, and some of these were very well made. Another class spent their time in hunting opossums, coons, rabbits, and other game. But the majority spent the holidays in sports, ball-playing, wrestling, boxing, running, foot-races, dancing, and drinking whiskey, and this latter mode was generally most agreeable to their masters.

A slave who would work during the holidays was thought by his master undeserving of holidays. There was in this simple act of continued work an accusation against slaves, and a slave could not help thinking that if he made three dollars during the holidays he might make three hundred during the years. Not to be drunk during the holidays was disgraceful.

We were induced to drink, I among the rest, and when the holidays were over we all staggered up from our filth and wallowing, took a long breath, and went away to our various fields of work, feeling, upon the whole, rather glad to go from that which our masters had artfully deceived us into the belief was freedom, back again to the arms of slavery. It was not what we had taken it to be, nor what it would have been, had it not been abused by us.

It was about as well to be slave to master, as to be a slave to whiskey and rum. When the slave was drunk, the slaveholder had no fear that he would plan an insurrection, or that he would escape to the North. It was the sober, thoughtful slave who was dangerous and needed the vigilance of his master to keep him a slave.



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