



FREDERICK DOUGLASS

“Nelly’s noble resistance”

in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1855

As an enslaved child less than eight years old, Frederick Douglass witnessed the brutal whipping of his Aunt Esther for continuing to visit a young enslaved man she had been forbidden to see. From this experience Douglass began to understand the status of a slave — one with no power, no rights, and no haven from injustice. A slave’s choices in the face of white power were submission or resistance, and resistance promised harsh punishment. Here Douglass recounts the “noble resistance” of an enslaved woman named Nelly who, while being whipped for “impudence,” never ceased to struggle and curse her tormenter. “He had bruised her flesh,” Douglass says, “but had left her invincible spirit undaunted.”

One of the first [whippings] which I saw, and which greatly agitated me, was the whipping of a woman belonging to Col. Lloyd named Nelly. The offense alleged against Nelly was one of the commonest and most indefinite in the whole catalogue of offenses usually laid to the charge of slaves, viz [that is to say]: “impudence.” This may mean almost anything or nothing at all, just according to the caprice of the master or overseer at the moment. But whatever it is or is not, if it gets the name of “impudence,” the party charged with it is sure of a flogging.

This offense may be committed in various ways — in the tone of an answer, in answering at all, in not answering, in the expression of countenance, in the motion of the head, in the gait, manner and bearing of the slave. In the case under consideration, I can easily believe that, according to all slaveholding standards, here was a genuine instance of impudence. In Nelly there were all the necessary conditions for committing the offense. She was a bright mulatto [person with one white and one black parent], the recognized wife of a favorite “hand” on board Col. Lloyd’s sloop [sailing vessel], and the mother of five sprightly children. She was a vigorous and spirited woman, and one of the most likely on the plantation to be guilty of impudence.

My attention was called to the scene by the noise, curses and screams that proceeded from it, and, on going a little in that direction, I came upon the parties engaged in the skirmish. Mr. Sevier, the overseer, had hold of Nelly when I caught sight of them; he was endeavoring to drag her toward a tree, which endeavor Nelly was sternly resisting, but to no purpose except to retard the progress of the overseer’s plans. Nelly — as I have said — was the mother of five children, three of them were present; and though quite small (from seven to ten years old, I should think), they gallantly came to their mother’s defense and gave the overseer an excellent pelting with stones. One of the little fellows ran up, seized the overseer by the leg and bit him, but the monster was too busily engaged with Nelly to pay any attention to the assaults

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of the children. There were numerous bloody marks on Mr. Sevier's face when I first saw him, and they increased as the struggle went on. The imprints of Nelly's fingers were visible, and I was glad to see them. Amidst the wild screams of the children — "*Let my mammy go*" — "*let my mammy go*" — there escaped from between the teeth of the bullet-headed overseer a few bitter curses, mingled with threats, that "he would teach the d—d b—h how to give a white man impudence."

There is no doubt that Nelly felt herself superior in some respects to the slaves around her. She was a wife and a mother, her husband was a valued and favorite slave. Besides, he was one of the first hands on board of the sloop, and the sloop hands — since they had to represent the plantation abroad [away from the plantation] — were generally treated tenderly. The overseer never was allowed to whip Harry; why, then, should he be allowed to whip Harry's wife? Thoughts of this kind, no doubt, influenced her, but for whatever reason she nobly resisted and, unlike most of the slaves, seemed determined to make her whipping cost Mr. Sevier as much as possible.

The blood on his (and her) face attested her skill as well as her courage and dexterity in using her nails. Maddened by her resistance, I expected to see Mr. Sevier level her to the ground by a stunning blow, but no; like a savage bull-dog — which he resembled both in temper and appearance — he maintained his grip and steadily dragged his victim toward the tree, disregarding alike her blows and the cries of the children for their mother's release. He would, doubtless, have knocked her down with his hickory stick, but that such act might have cost him his place [i.e., status as the person with power]. It is often deemed advisable to knock a *man* slave down in order to tie him, but it is considered cowardly and inexcusable in an overseer thus to deal with a *woman*. He is expected to tie her up and to give her what is called, in southern parlance, a "genteel flogging" without any very great outlay of strength or skill.

I watched with palpitating interest the course of the preliminary struggle and was saddened by every new advantage gained over her by the ruffian. There were times when she seemed likely to get the better of the brute, but he finally overpowered her and succeeded in getting his rope around her arms and in firmly tying her to the tree, at which he had been aiming. This done, and Nelly was at the mercy of his merciless lash; and now, what followed, I have no heart to describe. The cowardly creature made good his every threat and wielded the lash with all the hot zest of furious revenge. The cries of the woman while undergoing the terrible infliction were mingled with those of the children, sounds which I hope the reader may never be called upon to hear. When Nelly was untied, her back was covered with blood. The red stripes were all over her shoulders. She was whipped — severely whipped, but she was not subdued, for she continued to denounce the overseer and to call him every vile name. He had bruised her flesh but had left her invincible spirit undaunted.

Such floggings are seldom repeated by the same overseer. They prefer to whip those who are most easily whipped. The old doctrine that submission is the best cure for outrage and wrong does not hold good on the slave plantation. He is whipped oftenest who is whipped easiest, and that slave who has the courage to stand up for himself against the overseer, although he may have many hard stripes at the first, becomes in the end a freeman, even though he sustain the formal relation of a slave. "You can shoot me but you can't whip me," said a slave to Rigby Hopkins, and the result was that he was neither whipped nor shot. If the latter had been his fate, it would have been less deplorable than the living and lingering death to which cowardly and slavish souls are subjected.

I do not know that Mr. Sevier ever undertook to whip Nelly again. He probably never did, for it was not long after his attempt to subdue her that he was taken sick, and died. The wretched man died as he had lived, unrepentant; and it was said — with how much truth I know not — that in the very last hours of his life his ruling passion showed itself, and, that when wrestling with death, he was uttering horrid oaths and flourishing the cowskin as though he was tearing the flesh off some helpless slave. One thing is certain, that when he was in health, it was enough to chill the blood and to stiffen the hair of an ordinary man to hear Mr. Sevier talk. Nature, or his cruel habits, had given to his face an expression of unusual savageness, even for a slave-driver.