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Sufferings of Slaves

We have already seen what Islam did achieve in alleviating the plight of the slaves and how, for the first and last time in the history, slaves were regarded as human beings having rights upon their masters. Now let us see how the Christians treated their slaves.

Before giving the description, I must make one point clear. These accounts are of the plight of the slaves during the last five centuries when, as mentioned earlier, the Christians started slave-trade on a previously unimaginable scale. As I have shown in the last chapter, the Arabs also gave them a willing helping hand in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

As most of the European accounts of the slave-trade in Africa date from this period, so there are many vivid descriptions of what men saw there. Thus, the Christians must bear the responsibility of these horrors in a far greater degree. They were inflicting these injuries for four centuries compared with one century in which the Arabs joined hands with them on their instigation though quite willingly.

The victims were the poor and defenceless Africans, the Negroes of the west and east coast of Africa and also of the interior of that continent. They were treated as mere chattels and tools or even worse. They had to work or rather they were forced to work in inhuman conditions on the newly acquired plantations of their masters, the Christian Western powers, who had taken possessions of the islands across the Atlantic and in the New World and also at home in Portugal and Spain and the countries of central Europe of the Holy Roman Empire under the spiritual domain of the Roman Catholic Popes.

The horrors of the slave trade were most pronounced during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Wherever a raid on a village took place, death and destruction followed. Many more people died defending their homes and families, or as a result of the starvation and disease which usually followed such violence, than were ever actually enslaved, let alone sold at the coast.

One shudders to think of the most diabolical ways in which the poor natives of Africa were captured, separated from their kith and kin, carried away and treated as worse than animals. We shall now give a short account from the books of Western authors themselves on how the slaves were treated and what cruel methods were employed by the slave hunters. Their methods were at once crude and wasteful,

because they were robbers, not warriors. “Their practice was to surround some villages which they have marked down for their prey, and approach it silently at night. The village was usually a collection of primitive mud huts thatched with bamboo's and palm leaves, all highly inflammable, which they set alight without compunction, generally at dawn.

As the inhabitants woke to the cracking of flames and struggled into the open, they were rounded up and made prisoners. Any of them who resisted were cut down, as the slave hunters had no mercy for them. They had no use for the old or infirm or for babes who were all killed on the spot, and only men and women in their prime, and young boys and girls, were spared, to be carried off into slavery, leaving behind the dead bodies and dying ashes, where once there had been happy homes and flourishing settlements. The waste was out of all proportion to the prize. But waste, wanton waste, was the hall–mark of the negro slavery, from its first moments to the last. Wherever it reared its head, death, disease and destruction were its invariable concomitants...

“Those captured far inland were less fortunate, for they had to march to the coast on their feet – a dreary trudge over many miles of thick forest and rough desert. They walked almost naked, with no protection against sharp thorns, and jagged stones. To prevent escape, they had heavy forked poles fastened round their necks; their hands, if they were troublesome, might be secured through holes in a rough wooden board, and they were fettered with chains on their ankles. Linked together by ropes, the long lines known as coffles, they trudged miserably on towards their terrifying fate; for all Africans knew that the white were fed on the negros bought from the barracoons. Their captors drove them relentlessly forward, ignoring wounds and lacerations, and physicking their energy by plentiful flicks of the whips. If any succumbed, he was thrown on one side; if any of them became too ill, they were left to die or more mercifully knocked on the head.”[1]

“...In fair weather or foul, in spite of diseases and deaths, and for all the insurrections and suicides, every year the ships brought thousands of slaves to America and the West Indies.. They came in ships of many nations – French, Dutch, Portuguese and Danish – but more than half were brought in English ships that sailed from Bristol, London, or Liverpool. Year in and year out, they were set ashore diseased or whole, resigned or despairing and were lost forever to the land of their birth... The uses of servitude, like its abuses, never change; they were the same all the world over and from one age to another. In America and the West Indies, as in ancient Rome, or in Greece or the dim beginnings of history, slavery was divided into two broad types – domestic slavery and the slavery of the works and plantations.”[2]

Let us now give some more extracts from the same book *Freedom from Fear or the Slave and his Emancipation* by O. A. Sherrard, to show how and to what degree the foremost Christian nations of the West meted out the most inhuman treatment to the defenceless Negroes. The reader would also see their debased beliefs and notions about human beings who differed from them in colour and race.

“From the broad historical outlook, they had passed through two stages: in the first bearing on their shoulders, like a patient Atlas, the glories of many long dead civilizations; and in the second, more

wretched than the first, losing even that vicarious honour, and failing to an abject state in which they contributed solely to private greed. Their condition, especially in their second phase, should have scared the conscience of a nominally Christian world, but left it peculiarly unmoved. The idea of slavery was so deeply ingrained that no one questioned its propriety. All nations either endured or enjoyed it."[3]

"The lot of plantation slave was really very hard. The job assigned to him was, from his point of view, skilled; he was to cultivate a crop unknown to him – for the most part sugar in the West Indies, cotton or tobacco in America – and, in that his work was novel, he endured a heavier burden than his counterpart in Greece or Rome or among the serfs of Europe.. All was new and strange to him; he had, therefore, to be broken in; he had to be taught his new duties; he had to be seasoned' as the saying was. 'Seasoning' was a euphemism for a harsh discipline, which was reckoned by the opponents of slavery to carry off not less than twenty per cent of those who underwent it. May be that was over the mark, but it must nonetheless be admitted that large numbers died. The discipline was painful, and there was little to ameliorate and much to embitter its seventy.[4]

The slaves had to pass through terrible stages of suffering. The cumulative effect of all the hardships was disastrous. To quote Sherrard again, "this was particularly true of the 'seasoning', for beyond doubt a large proportion of those who died under its discipline would have died in any event from the effects of the middle passage. Experience showed that the greater number of those who were weak or emaciated on arrival died soon afterwards whatever they did. The medical authorities put this down to 'long confinement in slave-houses previous to embarkation, want of cleanliness and ventilation while on hoard the slave-ships, alterations in dress, food and habits, and, not the least, change of climate' (Buxton, p. 188).

But they agreed that there was something more – a psychological or spiritual malaise, which they described, perhaps a little portentously, as 'the sad recollection of kindred and friendship, the rude violation of all the sacred and social endearments of country and relationship, and the degrading anticipation of endless unmitigated bondage.' This when add to the physical hardships too often dissolved the will to live, and the slave seized the first chance to do away with himself, or more simply, pined away and died." There were at least five types of owners and five forms of negro slavery – Spanish, French, Dutch, Danish and British – without counting America, which at the outset was British. The Americans, in the U.S.A, are even now, in the twentieth century, flouting their own laws and the Negro has not yet succeeded in securing full rights of citizenship, and there are problems for the Negro in his own home-land as the world knows too well.

The terrible fate of plantation slave is notorious – how he was branded with hot irons, how he was forced to work heavy chains, his back was torn and scarred with the lash, how at night he was locked in a prison, the ergastulum, often underground and always filthy. "The Portuguese built a series of forts or barracoons as they came to be called, on the Guinea coast, where wretched Africans could be rounded up and kept safe till the numbers were sufficient to justify transhipment to Spain, to slavery...and

eventually to America and the New World...their souls were doomed to eternal perdition; their bodies were the property of the Christian nation who should occupy their soil."[5]

The author describes how slavery was introduced into England's colonies in America: "A Dutch ship was entering the James River in Virginia and landing twenty Negroes for sale. The colonists promptly bought them and thus Negro slavery was introduced into England's American colonies." In a short time, "England acquired the first place in the coveted traffic in slaves, a position which she held for over ninety years."

"The slaves were sold at auctions, being bought in stark naked, men and women, alike, and mounted on a chair, where the bidders handled and prodded them and felt their muscles and examined their teeth and made them jump and flex their arms, to satisfy themselves that they were not bidding for a diseased or disabled lot. As the slaves were bought single, it followed that often husband and wife, children and parents went to different owners; and the loss of kith and kin and all that the slaves held dear was added to the loss of liberty. So the slave left the auction room, bereaved of everything, to begin a new life of 'abject, hopeless and crushing servitude'."[6]

1. Sherrard, B.A., Freedom from Fear (London, 1959) pp. 61-62.
2. Ibid, pp. 67f.
3. Ibid, p.11.
4. Ibid, p. 69.
5. Ibid, p. 26.
6. Ibid, p. 67. s

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