



A Slave's Account of Coming to America *Olaudah Equiano*

Olaudah Equiano (1745 – 1801), also known as Gustavus Vassa, was born in Benin, now part of southern Nigeria. He was kidnapped into slavery at age 11 and taken to America, where he worked on a Virginia plantation, for a British naval officer, and for a Philadelphia merchant. He eventually bought his freedom, converted to Methodism, and moved to England to promote the abolition of slavery. Equiano wrote the first important slave narrative, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African; by Himself, which was published around 1790. The book was immensely popular in both America and England.



My father, besides many slaves, had a numerous family, of which seven lived to grow up...In this way I grew up till I was turned the age of eleven, when an end was put to my happiness in the following manner.

Generally when the grown people in the neighborhood were gone far in the fields to labor, the children assembled together in some of the neighbors' premises to play; and commonly some of us used to get up a tree to look out for any assailant, or kidnapper, that might come upon us; for they some-times took those opportunities of our parents absence to attack and carry off as many as they could seize... One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual, and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls and in a moment seized us both, and, without giving us time to cry out, or make resistance, they stopped our mouths, and ran off with us into the nearest wood...

[Here, Equiano describes his travels and enslavement among various African tribes]

Thus I continued to travel, sometimes by land, sometimes by water, through different countries and various nations, till, at the end of six or seven months after I had been kidnapped, I arrived at the sea coast. . . . The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I were found by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke, (which was very different from any I had ever heard) united to confirm me in this belief. Indeed such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment, that, if ten thousand worlds had been my own I would have freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country...

I now saw myself deprived of all chance of returning to my native country, or even the least glimpse of hope of gaining the shore which I now considered as friendly; and I even wished for my former slavery in preference to my present situation, which was filled with horrors of every kind, still heightened by my ignorance of what I was to undergo. I was not long suffered to indulge my grief; I was soon put down tinder the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across I think the windlass and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely. I had never experienced anything of this kind before; and although, not

being used to the water, I naturally feared that element the first time I saw it, yet nevertheless, could I have got over the nettings, I would have jumped over the side, but I could not; and, besides, the crew used to watch us very closely who were not chained down to the decks, lest we should leap into the water: and I have seen some of these poor African prisoners most severely cut for attempting to do so, and hourly whipped for not eating. This indeed was often the case with myself... At last, when the ship we were in had got in all her cargo, they made ready with many fearful noises, and we were all put under deck, So that we could not feel how they managed the vessel...

At last we came in sight of the island of Barbados, at which the whites on board gave a great shout, and made many signs of joy to us. Many merchants and planters now came on board. They put us in separate parcels and examined us attentively. They also made us jump, and pointed to the land, signifying we had to go there. We were conducted immediately to the merchant's yard, where we were pent up altogether like so many sheep in a fold, without regard to sex or age. We were not many days in the merchant's custody before we were sold after their usual manner, which is this: on a signal given, the buyers rush at once into the yard where the slaves are confined and make a choice of that parcel they like best. The noise and clamor with which this is attended and the eagerness in the countenances of the buyers, serve not a little to increase the apprehensions of the terrified Africans ...

In this manner, without scruple, are relations and friends separated, most of them never to see each other again....I remember in the vessel in which I was brought over, in the men's apartment, there were several brothers, who, in the sale, were sold in different lots; and it was very moving on this occasion to see and hear their cries at parting. O, ye nominal Christians! Might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you? Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends, to toil for your luxury and lust of gain? Must every tender feeling be likewise sacrificed to your avarice? Are the dearest friends and relations, now rendered more dear by their separation from their kindred, still to be parted from each other, and thus prevented from cheering the gloom of slavery with the small comfort of being together and mingling their sufferings and sorrows? Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives? Surely this is a new refinement in cruelty, which, while it has no advantage to atone for it, thus aggravates distress, and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery.

Questions

1. Who were Equiano's first captors? How did Equiano react to his white captors?
2. What did Equiano believe was going to happen on the ship? Why?
3. Why did he refuse to eat? What was the result of this action? Why was this done?
4. What notion does Equiano use to convince his readers of the immorality of separating families?
5. What was Equiano's purpose in writing this memoir? Is it a condemnation of the practice of slavery, or of the slave trade? Explain your answer.