from *Behind the Scenes* by Elizabeth Keckley source: http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/keckley/keckley.html

Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley (ca. 1818-1907) was born enslaved in Dinwiddie County, Virginia, to Agnes Hobbs and George Pleasant, a man owned by a different master. Keckley experienced harsh treatment under slavery, including beatings as well as the sexual assault of a white man, Alexander Kirkland, by whom she had a son named George. She was eventually given to Burwell's daughter, Ann Garland—with whom she moved to St. Louis. There she became a dressmaker and supported Garland's entire household for over two years. She married James Keckley around 1852, discovering only afterward that he was not a freeman. Prior to her marriage, Keckley had negotiated with the Garlands to purchase her freedom and that of her son, but she could not raise the required $1,200, because of the strain of supporting her "dissipated" husband and the Garland household. Sympathetic customers loaned Keckley the money to purchase her freedom and that of her son in 1855. In 1860, she left her husband and moved to Washington, D.C., where she set up a dressmaking shop. Keckley's clients were the wives of influential politicians, and she eventually became the dresser and close confidante of Mary Todd Lincoln. After President Lincoln's assassination, Keckley made several attempts to raise money for the former first lady, including an 1867 clothing auction that scandalized the public. Keckley published *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* in 1868, partly to help Mrs. Lincoln financially and partly to counter criticism of Mrs. Lincoln. Though Keckley anticipated some disapproval for publishing personal details about Mrs. Lincoln and White House private life, she did not foresee the overwhelming public disapproval that led to the end of her dressmaking career as well as condemnation from the Lincoln family. She left Washington in 1892 to teach domestic skills at Wilberforce University, but ill health forced her to return and spend her final years in the Home for Destitute Women and Children, which she had helped to establish. She died there after a stroke in 1907.

The first chapters describe Keckley's childhood and life in slavery. The love of Keckley's immediate family contrasts sharply with the abuse she receives at the hands of her owners. [ . . . ] Writing against the antebellum myth of the happy slave, Keckley observes that slave owners were the cause of much suffering. [ . . . ]

At fourteen, Keckley is sent to live in North Carolina as a charitable loan to Burwell's eldest son, who could not afford his own servants. Keckley's presence causes rancor with young Mrs. Burwell. She encourages Mr. Bingham, the village schoolmaster, to abuse Keckley physically in order to subdue her "proud, rebellious spirit." During this period, Keckley is raped by a white man, a topic to which she alludes only obliquely, explaining that "I do not care to dwell upon this subject, for it is one that is fraught with pain."

In these excerpts from the first two chapters, Keckley relates the story of how her master, Col. Burwell, disliked seeing his slaves unhappy but had no qualms about selling them. She then tells of her experiences with the her master's son and her assault at the hands of Bingham.

**CHAPTER 1.**

When I was about seven years old I witnessed, for the first time, the sale of a human being.

We were living at Prince Edward, in Virginia, and master had just purchased his hogs for the winter, for which he was unable to pay in full. To escape from his embarrassment it was necessary to sell one of the slaves. Little Joe, the son of the cook, was selected as the victim. His mother was ordered to dress him up in his Sunday clothes, and send him to the house. 5 He came in with a bright face, was placed in the scales, and was sold, like the hogs, at so much per pound. His mother was kept in ignorance of the transaction, but her suspicions were aroused. When her son started for Petersburgh in the wagon, the truth began to dawn upon her mind, and she pleaded piteously that her boy should not be taken from her; but master quieted her by telling her that he was simply going to town with the wagon, and would be back in the morning.

Morning came, but little Joe did not return to his mother. Morning after morning passed, and the mother went down to the 10 grave without ever seeing her child again. One day she was whipped for grieving for her lost boy. Colonel Burwell never liked to see one of his slaves wear a sorrowful face, and those who offended in this particular way were always punished. Alas! the sunny face of the slave is not always an indication of sunshine in the heart. Colonel Burwell at one time owned about seventy slaves, all of which were sold, and in a majority of instances wives were separated from husbands and children from their parents.

15 Slavery in the Border States forty years ago was different from what it was twenty years ago. Time seemed to soften the hearts of master and mistress, and to insure kinder and more humane treatment to bondsmen and bondswomen. When I was quite a child, an incident occurred which my mother afterward impressed more strongly on my mind. One of my uncles, a slave of Colonel Burwell, lost a pair of ploughlines, and when the loss was made known the master gave him a new pair, and told him that if he did not take care of them he would punish him severely. In a few weeks the second pair of lines 20 was stolen, and my uncle hung himself rather than meet the displeasure of his master. My mother went to the spring in the morning for a pail of water, and on looking up into the willow tree which shaded the bubbling crystal stream, she discovered the lifeless form of her brother suspended beneath one of the strong branches. Rather than be punished the way Colonel Burwell punished his servants, he took his own life.

Slavery had its dark side as well as its bright side.

**CHAPTER 2. GIRLHOOD AND ITS SORROWS.**

25 I MUST pass rapidly over the stirring events of my early life. When I was about fourteen years old I went to live with my master's eldest son, a Presbyterian minister. His salary was small, and he was burdened with a helpless wife, a girl that he had married in the humble walks of life. She was morbidly sensitive, and imagined that I regarded her with contemptuous feelings because she was of poor parentage.

I was their only servant, and a gracious loan at that. They were not able to buy me, so my old master sought render them 30 assistance by allowing them the benefit of my services. From the very first I did the work of three servants, and yet I was scolded and regarded with distrust.

The years passed slowly, and I continued to serve them, and at the same time grew into strong, healthy womanhood. I was nearly eighteen when we removed from Virginia to Hillsboro', North Carolina, where young Mr. Burwell took charge of a church. The salary was small, and we still had to practice the closest economy. Mr. Bingham, a hard, cruel man, the village 35 schoolmaster, was a member of my young master's church, and he was a frequent visitor to the parsonage. She whom I called mistress seemed to be desirous to wreak vengeance on me for something, and Bingham became her ready tool.

During this time my master was unusually kind to me; he was naturally a good-hearted man, but was influenced by his wife. It was Saturday evening, and while I was bending over the bed, watching the baby that I had just hushed into slumber, Mr. Bingham came to the door and asked me to go with him to his study. Wondering what he meant by his strange request, I 40 followed him, and when we had entered the study he closed the door, and in his blunt way remarked: "Lizzie, I am going to flog you." I was thunderstruck, and tried to think if I had been remiss in anything. I could not recollect of doing anything to deserve punishment, and with surprise exclaimed: "Whip me, Mr. Bingham! what for?"

         "No matter," he replied, "I am going to whip you, so take down your dress this instant."

         Recollect, I was eighteen years of age, was a woman fully developed, and yet this man coolly bade me take down my dress. 45 I drew myself up proudly, firmly, and said: "No, Mr. Bingham, I shall not take down my dress before you. Moreover, you shall not whip me unless you prove the stronger. Nobody has a right to whip me but my own master, and nobody shall do so if I can prevent it."

         My words seemed to exasperate him. He seized a rope, caught me roughly, and tried to tie me. I resisted with all my strength, but he was the stronger of the two, and after a hard struggle succeeded in binding my hands and tearing my dress 50 from my back. Then he picked up a rawhide, and began to ply it freely over my shoulders. With steady hand and practiced eye he would raise the instrument of torture, nerve himself for a blow, and with fearful force the rawhide descended upon the quivering flesh. It cut the skin, raised great welts, and the warm blood trickled down my back. Oh God! I can feel the torture now--the terrible, excruciating agony of those moments. I did not scream; I was too proud to let my tormentor know what I was suffering. I closed my lips firmly, that not even a groan might escape from them, and I stood like a statue 55 while the keen lash cut deep into my flesh. As soon as I was released, stunned with pain, bruised and bleeding, I went home and rushed into the presence of the pastor and his wife, wildly exclaiming: "Master Robert, why did you let Mr. Bingham flog me? What have I done that I should be so punished?"

         "Go away," he gruffly answered, "do not bother me."

         I would not be put off thus. "What *have* I done? I *will* know why I have been flogged."

60 I saw his cheeks flush with anger, but I did not move. He rose to his feet, and on my refusing to go without an explanation, seized a chair, struck me, and felled me to the floor. I rose, bewildered, almost dead with pain, crept to my room, dressed my bruised arms and back as best I could, and then lay down, but not to sleep. No, I could not sleep, for I was suffering mental as well as bodily torture.

My spirit rebelled against the unjustness that had been inflicted upon me, and though I tried to smother my anger and to 65 forgive those who had been so cruel to me, it was impossible. The next morning I was more calm, and I believe that I could then have forgiven everything for the sake of one kind word. But the kind word was not proffered, and it may be possible that I grew somewhat wayward and sullen. Though I had faults, I know now, as I felt then, harshness was the poorest inducement for the correction of them. It seems that Mr. Bingham had pledged himself to Mrs. Burwell to subdue what he called my "stubborn pride."

70 On Friday following the Saturday on which I was so savagely beaten, Mr. Bingham again directed me come to his study. I went, but with the determination to offer resistance should he attempt to flog me again. On entering the room I found him prepared with a new rope and a new cowhide. I told him that I was ready to die, but that he could not conquer me. In struggling with him I bit his finger severely, when he seized a heavy stick and beat me with it in a shameful manner. Again I went home sore and bleeding, but with pride as strong and defiant as ever.

75 The following Thursday Mr. Bingham again tried to conquer me, but in vain. We struggled, and he struck me many savage blows. As I stood bleeding before him, nearly exhausted with his efforts, he burst into tears, and declared that it would be a sin to beat me any more. My suffering at last subdued his hard heart; he asked my forgiveness, and afterwards was an altered man. He was never known to strike one of his servants from that day forward. Mr. Burwell, he who preached the love of Heaven, who glorified the precepts and examples of Christ, who expounded the Holy Scriptures Sabbath after 80 Sabbath from the pulpit, when Mr. Bingham refused to whip me any more, was urged by his wife to punish me himself.

One morning he went to the wood-pile, took an oak broom, cut the handle off, and with this heavy handle attempted to conquer me. I fought him, but he proved the strongest. At the sight of my bleeding form, his wife fell upon her knees and begged him to desist. My distress even touched her cold, jealous heart. I was so badly bruised that I was unable to leave my bed for five days. I will not dwell upon the bitter anguish of these hours, for even the thought of them now makes me 85 shudder. The Rev. Mr. Burwell was not yet satisfied. He resolved to make another attempt to subdue my proud, rebellious spirit--made the attempt and again failed, when he told me, with an air of penitence, that he should never strike me another blow; and faithfully he kept his word. These revolting scenes created a great sensation at the time, were the talk of the town and neighborhood, and I flatter myself that the actions of those who had conspired against me were not viewed in a light to reflect much credit upon them.

90         The savage efforts to subdue my pride were not the only things that brought me suffering and deep mortification during my residence at Hillsboro. I was regarded as fair-looking for one of my race, and for four years a white man--I spare the world his name--had base designs upon me. I do not care to dwell upon this subject, for it is one that is fraught with pain. Suffice it to say, that he persecuted me for four years, and I--I--became a mother. The child of which he was the father was the only 95 child that I ever brought into the world. If my poor boy ever suffered any humiliating pangs on account of birth, he could not blame his mother, for God knows that she did not wish to give him life; he must blame the edicts of that society which deemed it no crime to undermine the virtue of girls in my then position.

Among the old letters preserved by my mother I find the following, written by myself while at Hillsbor'. In this connection I desire to state that Rev. Robert Burwell is now living at Charlotte, North Carolina:

"HILLSBORO', April 10, 1838.

        "MY DEAR MOTHER:--I have been intending to write to you for a long time, but numerous things have prevented, and for that reason you must excuse me.

         "I thought very hard of you for not writing to me, but hope that you will answer this letter as soon as you receive it, and tell me how you like Marsfield, and if you have seen any of old acquaintances, or if you yet know any of the brick-house people who I think so much of. I want to hear of the family at home very much, indeed. I really believe you and all the family have forgotten me, if not I certainly should have heard from some of you since you left Boyton, if it was only a line; nevertheless I love you all very dearly, and shall, although I may never see you again, nor do I ever expect to. Miss Anna is going to Petersburgh in winter, but she says that she does not intend take me; what reason she has for leaving me cannot tell. I have often wished that I lived where I knew I never could see you, for then I would not have my hopes raised, and to be disappointed in this manner; however, it is said that a bad beginning makes a good ending, but I hardly expect to see that happy day at this place. Give my love to all the family, both white and black. I was very much obliged to you for the presents you sent me last summer, though it is quite late in the day to be thanking for them. Tell Aunt Bella that I was very much obliged to her for her present; I have been so particular with it that I have only worn it once.

         "There have been six weddings since October; the most respectable one was about a fortnight ago; I was asked to be the first attendant, but, as usual with all my expectations, I was disappointed, for on the wedding-day I felt more like being locked up in a three-cornered box than attending a wedding. About a week before Christmas I was bridesmaid for Ann Nash; when the night came I was in quite a trouble; I did not know whether my frock was clean or dirty; I only had a week's notice, and the body and sleeves to make, and only one hour every night to work on it, so you can see with these troubles to overcome my chance was rather slim. I must now close, although I could fill ten pages with my griefs and misfortunes; no tongue could express them as I feel; don't forget me though; and answer my letters soon. I will write you again, and would write more now, but Miss Anna says it is time I had finished. Tell Miss Elizabeth that I wish she would make haste and get married, for mistress says that I belong to her when she gets married.

         "I wish you would send me a pretty frock this summer; if you will send it to Mrs. Robertson's Miss Bet will send it to me.

"Farewell, darling mother.

"Your affectionate daughter,

"ELIZABETH HOBBS."