

III.
THE SLAVES' NEW YEAR'S DAY.

1 DR. Flint owned a fine residence in town, several farms, and about fifty slaves, besides hiring
a number by the year. Hiring-day at the south takes place on the 1st of January. On the 2d,
the slaves are expected to go to their new masters. On a farm, they work until the corn and
cotton are laid. They then have two holidays. Some masters give them a good dinner under
5 the trees. This over, they work until Christmas eve. If no heavy charges are meantime
brought against them, they are given four or five holidays, whichever the master or overseer
may think proper. Then comes New Year's eve; and they gather together their little alls, or
more properly speaking, their little nothings, and wait anxiously for the dawning of day. At the
appointed hour the grounds are thronged with men, women, and children, waiting, like
40 criminals, to hear their doom pronounced. The slave is sure to know who is the most
humane, or cruel master, within forty miles of him. It is easy to find out, on that day, who
clothes and feeds his slaves well; for he is surrounded by a crowd, begging, "Please, massa,
hire me this year. I will work very hard, massa." If a slave is unwilling to go with his new
master, he is whipped, or locked up in jail, until he consents to go, and promises not to run
45 away during the year. Should he chance to change his mind, thinking it justifiable to violate
an extorted promise, woe unto him if he is caught! The whip is used till the blood flows at his
feet; and his stiffened limbs are put in chains, to be dragged in the field for days and days! If
he lives until the next year, perhaps the same man will hire him again, without even giving
him an opportunity of going to the hiring-ground. After those for hire are disposed of, those for
50 sale are called up. O, you happy free women, contrast your New Year's day with that of the
poor bond-woman! With you it is a pleasant season, and the light of the day is blessed.
Friendly wishes meet you everywhere, and gifts are showered upon you. Even hearts that
have been estranged from you soften at this season, and lips that have been silent echo
back, "I wish you a happy New Year." Children bring their little offerings, and raise their rosy
25 lips for a caress. They are your own, and no hand but that of death can take them from you.
But to the slave mother New Year's day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her
cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and
often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns. She may be an
ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood; but she
30 has a mother's instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies. On one of these sale
days, I saw a mother lead seven children to the auction-block. She knew that some of them
would be taken from her; but they took all. The children were sold to a slave-trader, and their
mother was bought by a man in her own town. Before night her children were all far away.
She begged the trader to tell her where he intended to take them; this he refused to do. How
35 could he, when he knew he would sell them, one by one, wherever he could command the
highest price? I met that mother in the street, and her wild, haggard face lives to-day in my
mind. She wrung her hands in anguish, and exclaimed, "Gone! all gone! Why don't God kill
me?" I had no words wherewith to comfort her. Instances of this kind are of daily, yea, of
hourly occurrence. Slaveholders have a method, peculiar to their institution, of getting rid of
40 old slaves, whose lives have been worn out in their service. I knew an old woman, who for
seventy years faithfully served her master. She had become almost helpless, from hard labor
and disease. Her owners moved to Alabama, and the old black woman was left to be sold to
43 any body who would give twenty dollars for her.

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the life of a slave girl*, 1861

Now, what were the names of books written by H.L. Mencken? I did not know any of them. I finally wrote what I thought would be a foolproof note: Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy—I used the word “nigger” to make the librarian feel that I could not possibly be the author of the note—have some books by H.L. Mencken? I forged the white man’s name.

I entered the library as I had always done when on errands for whites, but I felt that I would somehow slip up and betray myself. I doffed my hat, stood a respectful distance from the desk, looked as unbookish as possible and waited for the white patrons to be taken care of. When the desk was clear of people, I still waited. The white librarian looked at me.

“What do you want, boy?”

As though I did not possess the power of speech, I stepped forward and simply handed her the forged note, not parting my lips.

“What books by Mencken does he want?” she asked. “I don’t know, ma’am,” I said, avoiding her eyes.

“Who gave you this card?”

“Mr Falk,” I said.

“Where is he?”

“He’s at work. (...)”

“You’re not using these books, are you?” she asked pointedly.

“Oh, no, ma’am. I can’t read.” (...)

“I’m sending him two books,” she said. “But tell Mr Falk to come in next time (...).”

She stamped the card and handed me the books. Not daring to glance at them, I went out of the library, fearing that the woman would call me back for further questioning. A block away from the library I opened one of the books and read a title: *A Book of Prefaces*. I was nearing my nineteenth birthday and I did not know how to pronounce the word “preface”. I thumbed the pages and saw strange names. I shook my head, disappointed. I looked at the other book; it was called *Prejudices*. I knew what that word meant; I had heard it all my life. And right off I was on guard against Mencken books. Why would a man want to call a book *Prejudices*? The word was so stained with my memories of racial hate that I would not conceive of anybody using it for a title. (...)

That night in my rented room, while letting the hot water run over my can of pork and beans in the sink, I opened *A Book of Prefaces* and began to read. I was jarred and shocked at the style, the clear, clean, sweeping sentences. Why did he write like that? I pictured the man as a raging demon, slashing with his pen, consumed with hate, denouncing everything American, extolling everything European or German, laughing at the weaknesses of people, mocking God, authority. What was this? I stood up, trying to realize what reality lay behind the meaning of the words... Yes, this man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club. Could words be weapons? Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them as a weapon? No. It frightened me.

Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, 1945



Richard Wright
(1908–1960)

Born in Mississippi in 1908, Richard Wright, who left school at the age of 15, decided to migrate North to escape poverty and segregation. After spending some time in Memphis and Chicago, he moved to New York. A few years later, as he was disappointed by the unchanging situation of African Americans, he decided to migrate to France, where he spent the rest of his life. The novel *Black Boy* (1945), which is the first part of his autobiography, tells the story of his troubled youth in a racist environment. Richard Wright died in 1960.

1. foolproof: incapable of going wrong
2. forge: produce a fraudulent imitation of
3. when on errands = lorsque je faisais des commissions
4. betray oneself = se trahir
5. patrons = les habitués d'un lieu public
6. prejudices = des préjugés
7. be jarred: (here) be irritated
8. extol: praise enthusiastically
9. a club = une massue

The narrator, who is presently living in Memphis, Tennessee, has borrowed a library card from a white man named Mr Falk because he wants to read something by Henry Louis Mencken, whom he has just read an article about.

I, Too, Sing America

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems*, 1925