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**ISSN 2278-9529**  
**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## **Free Man, Kidnapped into Slavery and Miracle Liberation: Solomon Northup**

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**Article History:** Submitted-08/01/2020, Revised-25/02/2020, Accepted-26/02/2020, Published-29/02/2020.

### **Abstract:**

Solomon Northup is a free citizen of New York State, born into a free African American family in 1807. He is for thirty years and has a wonderful family. Kidnapping is rampant and many free African Americans like Solomon Northup are tricked, drugged and kidnapped and sold into slavery. Solomon is robbed off from everything that is precious to him, like freedom and family in 1841. He is taken to New Orleans slave market and is sold into slavery. For the next twelve years he labours on the plantations. Solomon is lucky to find Mr. Bass a kind soul. Solomon takes the help of Mr. Bass and sends letters to his friends in New York State. His friends and family take the aid of New York State and brings back Solomon Northup.

**Keywords: Antebellum Era; Kidnapping free slaves; Slave Trade; Sexual Abuse; Whipping; Protecting citizens.**

In "Twelve Years a Slave", the narrator Solomon Northup shows slavery from a different perspective. By birth, he is a free man and experiences the gift of freedom for more than three decades. He gets kidnapped into slavery. As DeFord points out that "Solomon Northup was unique: He was born free, then kidnapped and sold into slavery. Northup escaped and published his story." (DeFord 12) Solomon Northup suffers under the whip for twelve years.

Anne and Solomon are blessed with three children. Solomon is leading a comfortable life with his family. One day Solomon is walking the streets to find work in March 1841. While

Solomon is searching for a job near the corner of Congress Street, he is introduced to two gentlemen by one of his acquaintances. They want to hire Solomon's services for a brief period as they require someone to play the violin. They are Merrill Brown and Abram Hamilton associated with a circus company.

To Solomon, it is a tempting offer both financially and he desires to see metropolis, so he accepts it. Carol Wilson rightly observes that, "Some kidnapping victims were attracted by the promise of a job. The case of Solomon Northup, probably the most famous kidnapping case, involved such deception." (Wilson 11) Solomon does not inform his wife as he thinks to come back soon. He sets out immediately with them driving their carriage towards Albany. They start their journey the next morning to reach without delay to the circus and reach New York. Solomon thinks his journey is come to an end. However, Brown and Hamilton influence him to go along with them to Washington D.C. They promise Solomon high wages, and he takes the offer. Before leaving New York, the two gentlemen suggest that they shall take free papers to Solomos. To that, Solomon is surprised and shocked why such thought does not occur to him. If any coloured man is caught in a slaveholding state without free papers, he is immediately sold into slavery. Solomon is happy that the two gentlemen reminded him timely.

A day before the interment of General Harrison they reach Washington by evening. They stay at Hotel Gadsby, and they pay Solomon forty-three dollars for his service. These two gentlemen are kind towards Solomon and he trusts them so much. According to Solomon Northup:

Whether they were accessory to my misfortunes-subtle and inhuman monsters in the shape of men-designedly luring me away from home and family, and liberty, for the sake of gold....  
(Solomon 15)

Both Mr. Brown and Mr. Hamilton advise Solomon not to venture into the streets and he is given room to sleep. The next day they show Solomon the Capitol and offer liquor to him. Here Solomon regrets that Providence does not warn him about the dangers that are waiting for him. Solomon laments that:

But no good angel of pity came to my bedside, bidding me to fly-  
no voice of mercy forewarned me in my dreams of the trails that  
were just at hand. (Solomon 15)

Solomon fell ill and can think only water that night. It is an hour or so after drinking water, Solomon is little conscious, and he knows that few people have entered his room. Solomon vaguely remembers that he is ill and that they are taking him to a physician. Later Solomon finds himself sitting on a low bench handcuffed and a couple of heavy shackles on his ankles:

...it was some time before I could collect my thoughts. Where I  
was? What was the meaning of these chains? Where was Brown  
and Hamilton? What had I done to deserve imprisonment in such a  
dungeon? I could not comprehend. (Solomon16)

Solomon is weak and cannot recall much in that oppressive silence. He starts to understand that he is kidnapped and bitterly weeps for his condition. Carol Wilson expresses that, "Kidnappers simply took their victims by incapacitating them or by threatening violence." (Wilson 11)

Solomon sees two people at the door of the slave pen; one of them looks cruel, Cunning, repugnant and sinister. He is James H Burch a trader in slaves with an associate by name Theophilus Freeman from New Orleans. Schermerhorn mentions that many people are involved in the supply chain of buying and selling slaves, "Orchestrating the loosely organized supply chain and distribution channel was Theophilus Freeman, a conspicuous architect of the new market." (Schermerhorn 8) The other person is Ebenezer Radburn, who works for Mr. Burch. Here Solomon ironically says that from that slave pen, the Capitol in Washington is visible, "slave pen within the very shadow of the Capitol". (Solomon18)

Mr. Burch transports slaves to the main city, Richmond in Virginia. Here the slaves are driven to a slave pen of Mr. Goodin. The next day morning all the slaves are ready for the journey to New Orleans. Mr. Burch heads back to Washington; he does not accompany his slaves. Kidnapping is rampant in antebellum South, and Carol Wilson gives the following reason:

The greed of kidnappers was one cause of the crime. The demand for labour assured a high market price for slaves, especially after the invention of the cotton gin, the abolition of the African slave trade, and the opening of new land in the Southwest. (Wilson 2)

At new Orleans Mr. Theophilus Freeman, the partner of Mr. Burch comes onto the ship with a piece of paper. He calls out the names of the slaves of Mr. Burch. He calls for a slave by name Platt and cannot find one with that name. Mr. Theophilus Freeman, pointing to Solomon asks the captain who shipped him? The captain answers that it is Mr. Burch. Mr. Theophilus Freeman forces the name Platt on Solomon on the direction of Mr. Burch.

The next day many customers arrive to purchase the slaves. Some slaveholders take slaves into a small room and strip them to examine closely. If scars are found on slaves that is an indication of rebellious attitude and such slaves are not preferred at auction. Walter Johnson throws light on how slaves are examined:

...slave buyers stripped the slaves naked, probed their bodies, and asked them questions,...the stakes were high, for their identities as masters and mistresses, planters and paternalists, hosts and hostesses, slave breakers and sexual predators were all lived through the bodies of people who could be bought and sold in the market. (Johnson 16)

Solomon and slaves of Mr. Burch falls sick. They are sold after a few weeks. William Ford offers thousand dollars for Solomon. William Ford is the Baptist preacher who lives in Great Pine Woods, part of Avoyelles Parish. It is in the middle of Louisiana on the right side of the river. Solomon ponders on the way about the prospects of his escape. He even thinks to open up himself and share his history with William Ford. But worries, that he may be sold further the South:

I would be disposed of as the thief disposed of his stolen horse, if any right to freedom was even whispered. (Solomon 36)

After travelling many miles, they reach Alexandria from New Orleans. The next day they start their journey and reach Bayou Lamourie. From there, William Ford's plantation is twelve kilometres, and the slaves have to reach it only on foot. Mr. Ford orders his slaves to go and take rest.

Solomon observes that lumber from Mr. Ford's mill is transported to Lamourie by land, and it is very expensive. He gets an idea to ship the lumber on a raft. Solomon approaches Adam Tayden the foreman of the mills with his idea but is rejected. However, William Ford gives Solomon to go ahead with the idea. Solomon creates a considerable sensation by successfully transporting the lumber on a raft. Mr. Ford praises Solomon and asks him to do it until the contract is fulfilled.

Tibeats, a carpenter, is employed at the house of Mr. Ford. To assist the carpenter Solomon is placed under him. It is so unfortunate that William Ford gets into a problem relates to the pecuniary matter and Solomon is sold to Tibeats, but Solomon is valued at more than the debt. To that William Ford takes four hundred dollars as part of a chattel mortgage.

Solomon earns a lot of money to his new master Tibeats, but Solomon is paid back with loads of abuses all the time. One day Tibeats comes with the whip and asks Solomon to strip, but Solomon rejects and tries to explain. Tibeats seizes the throat of Solomon with one hand and tries to whip him with the other hand. Solomon gets hold of Tibeats wrist and pushes him back. Solomon does not stop at that he gives a blow after blow to Tibeats till the later calls God for mercy. Tibeats threatens Solomon with that of death for his rebellion.

Solomon then regrets for his action, prays to God and weeps for his helplessness. Tibeats comes along with two other white men and orders Solomon to cross hands. Tibeats comes forward and ties the hands and ankles of Solomon, and his companions place a cord through Solomon's elbows. Tibeats then attaches a noose to the neck of Solomon and is in discussion where to hang the poor slave Solomon? The overseer Chapin is on pizza walking hastily.

As Tibeats and his companions are dragging Solomon, Chapin appears from his house holding pistols in both the hands. Chapin warns Tibeats and his friends that he will shoot at them if they move Platt (Solomon) one foot. They disappear from the place out of fear, without a word.

At around sunset, William Ford arrives, and says the following words, "Poor Platt, you're in a bad state" (Solomon 47). The weaving house is completed, and Solomon is hired to Peter Tanner to work with another carpenter by name Myers. It is done on the advice of William Ford.

After a month as the services of Solomon are not required, he is send back to his master Tibeats who is working on the cotton press of William Ford. Solomon is meticulous at his work to be in good books of Tibeats and always has an eye on his master Tibeats while at work. Chapin the overseer is away from the plantation on the third day of Solomon's return, Tibeats shouts at Solomon for something which he finds fault? Tibeats then comes with a hatchet threatening Solomon. The poor slave is in a fix and do not know what to do; if he keeps calm Tibeats will break open his brain. First, Solomon tries to run but afraid that Tibeats may throw the hatchet to kill him. After a quick thought, Solomon goes forward and holds the hand of Tibeats that has the hatchet and with the other hand, holds his Master by the throat. Solomon then snatches the hatchet and throws it away. Solomon is trying his best to avoid a conflict with his Master. However, Tibeats moves quickly to get hold of a broad axe. To this, Solomon jumps on Tibeats and holds him on the plank heavily. They both are in that position for a long time. According to Solomon:

Life is dear to every living thing; the worm that crawls upon the ground will struggle for it. At that moment it was dear to me, enslaved and treated as I was. (Solomon 52)

Solomon swings Tibeats on the floor and runs across the plantation to escape into the woods. Solomon takes to his legs and runs to hide in the swamp. The swamp is full of trees like cottonwood, Cyprus, gum and Sycamore trees. He then meets William Ford and narrates to him about his encounter with Tibeats. Mr. Ford is a kind man who speaks kindly and orders give food to Solomon.

Mr. Ford and Solomon set out on the fourth day to Bayou. Mr. Ford narrates the account of Solomon's plight in the swamps to Tibeats. But Tibeats complains that he gave money to David Cheney to catch Solomon alive or dead. William Ford says that Solomon is a faithful boy. Mr. Ford condemns the way Solomon is treated. Mr. Ford expresses that, "A little kindness would be far more effectual in restraining them, and rendering them obedient, than the use of

such deadly weapons". (Solomon 58) Mr. Ford advises Tibeats to hire Solomon out. Until then, Mr. Ford will keep Solomon out of Tibeats reach.

The next morning Solomon is happy because he is hired to Eldret. Solomon starts with his new Master Eldret to Big Cane Brake, a wild place, where Eldret wants to clean vast stretches of land for cultivation. On clearing vast stretch of lands in antebellum South, Damian Pargas states that:

...masters and slaves perceived different geographies in the antebellum South, and although white slaveholders viewed wild tracts of land in the southern frontier as virgin dreamscapes of financial opportunity, slaves often perceived them as daunting projects that promised little more than drudgery and primitive living conditions for years on end. (Pargas112)

Later Tibeats informs Solomon that he is sold to Edwin Epps. Edwin Epps is a huge man with six feet height, and repulsive manners. With the eccentric behaviour, Edwin Epps use to chase the slaves, and the screams of the slaves gives him the utmost happiness. For nearly ten years Solomon works for Edwin Epps, makes him rich and in turn only receives many curses and lashes.

The entire cotton crop on Bayou Boeuf is wiped out in 1845 by caterpillars. The Bayou Boeuf slaveholders receive news that there is high demand for labourers in St. Mary's Parish on sugar plantations for high wages. Planters on Bayou Boeuf decide to hire their slaves. Solomon is one among them. From Rio Teche to Centreville, many ships sailed. Solomon, who is desperate to escape, approaches a streamer's Captain for help but in vain.

Solomon talks in detail about cotton and sugarcane plantations. Schermerhorn calls the southern agriculture of commercial crops as dynamic zone "Northup toiled for a dozen years far up the Red River in a strikingly dynamic zone of cotton and sugar production before a near-miraculous rescue." (Schermerhorn 8)

Armsby, a white man, comes to Bayou Boeuf and is in search of an overseer job. He approaches Master Epps many times and also another planter by name Shaw. Armsby cannot find any job and has to work on the fields along with slaves, which is a strange thing to see in the southern states. Armsby use to go to Marksville town and Solomon tries to take his help in



posting a letter. Solomon requests Armsby to post the letter. Solomon begs him not expose him. The next day Armsby sits next to Master Epps and talks for nearly two hours. Solomon fears come true, and he is worried for his life. That night when Solomon is roasting bacon, Master Epps enters with a rawhide in hand and asks Solomon why he met Armsby. Solomon replies that he is innocent and that Armsby is lying to win the trust of Master Epps to get an overseer job. As Master Epps steps out, Solomon throws the letter in the fire and feels terrible as his hopes turn to ashes. Carol Wilson observes that:

Even if a kidnapped slave succeeded in convincing a white person of his or her story, few white southerners would be willing to expend time and money, as well as incurring the wrath of their neighbors, in pressing the victim's case. (Wilson 6)

Solomon is disappointed and is in a hopeless situation. He worries about getting old prematurely because of life on the field. Solomon's feelings are:

The hope of rescue was the only light that cast a ray of comfort on my heart. That was now flickering, faint and low; another breath of disappointment would extinguish it altogether, leaving me to grope in midnight darkness to the end of life. (Solomon 89)

Solomon talks about Patsey, a young slave girl who is tied up side down nakedly and Edwin Epps whips her nearly to death. As a mother, Mrs. Epps shall have taken care of her children by not exposing them to such acts of cruelty at a tender age. As Sam Worley observes that:

...black and white, who wrote about slavery mentioned the deleterious effects it had upon the moral character of whites. Northup certainly repeats these observations, but, more remarkably, he makes us see the moral blindness of slaveholders as itself the result of environment rather than innate evil or irrationality. (Worley 254)

Master Epps engages a carpenter by name Mr. Avery to erect a house. Solomon is moved from the field to assist the carpenter. Mr. Bass comes along with Mr. Avery. Solomon has great reverence to the person, "To the last moment of my existence I shall remember him with feelings of thankfulness. His name was Mr. Bass". (Solomon 100)

Mr. Bass is a man above forty years and a bachelor. He is from Canada and has wandered through many places and has arrived at Bayou Boeuf. Mr. Bass is a liberal man and is against the evil institution called slavery. As the work goes on to erect a house to Master Epps, both Mr. Bass and Master Ebbs discussed at length on the issue of slavery. Mr. Bass argues logically that no man has the right to hold another human being a slave.

On hearing Solomon, Mr. Bass is shocked. Solomon requests him to write and post a message to his friends in the North. Mr. Bass hears Solomon's misfortune and agrees to help. Then Solomon pleads to Mr. Bass to help him. He promises to help Solomon and is happy to try and reunite Solomon with his family. Mr. Bass posts letters as advised by Solomon. Master Epps house is completed, and Mr. Bass has to leave. Solomon pleads Mr. Bass and holds him to save him from slavery. That night before he left, Mr. Bass consoles Solomon and promises to come back a day before Christmas and to decide the further course of action.

Mr. Bass keep his word, and comes on the eve of Christmas. Mr. Bass tells Solomon that there is no reply for his letters from the North. The news struck Solomon hard, and he begs Mr. Bass to write again. However, Mr. Bass says that it may lead to suspicion of the postmaster. Mr. Bass tells Solomon that he made up his mind to travel to Saratoga and meet Solomon's family by himself. Solomon is busy next few days playing violin at various places. Solomon returns with many things offered to him by the white people on the plantations.

Finally Solomon narrates the events that led to his emancipation. The letter which Mr. Bass wrote to Messrs. Parker and Perry in August 1852 has reached them in September. The letter is forwarded to Anne by Messrs. Parker and Perry. The family is excited, and Anne immediately meets Henry B. Northup at Sandy Hill for his suggestion. He goes through the act that is passed in 1840 to protect citizens of the New York State from kidnapping. The act authorizes the Governor to free and restore its citizens to liberty on receiving sufficient information.

Henry B. Northup prepares a memorial that contains details of Anne's marriage to Solomon; Solomon going to Washington D.C and the letter sent by Mr. Bass. Solomon's wife, Anne, signs the memorial. The Governor takes interest and Henry B. Northup is appointed as an agent under the seal of the state by the Governor on November twenty-third the day 1852. Henry B. Northup starts only in the second week of December as he has other things to settle and reaches Washington D.C. Henry B. Northup is asked to go to New Orleans first, but he travels up the red River. On 1 January 1853, he gets down at Marksville and goes straight to the court. There he meets a gentleman with legal distinction by name John P. Waddill and briefs him. Mr. Waddill offers his services to trace out Solomon. But in slavery, Solomon Northup has been known as Platt.

The letter Mr. Bass wrote is dated at Bayou Boeuf, and they decide to search there. Mr. Waddill gives his carriage and asks his brother to help by searching the plantations along with Henry B. Northup on Monday. During that afternoon, both Mr. Waddill and Henry B. Northup talk about politics in the North and particularly abolitionist movement. To that Mr. Waddill tells Henry B. Northup that they too have an eccentric person by name Mr. Bass, a carpenter who is a staunch abolitionist. However, Mr. Waddill suddenly gets into thought and asks for the letter dated at Bayou Boeuf and comes to the conclusion that Mr. Bass worked last summer at Bayou Boeuf. Mr. Waddill, with excitement, bangs the table and is confident that Mr. Bass can help them in finding Solomon Northup.

They immediately search for Mr. Bass and come to know that he is at the landing to travel. Young Waddill and Henry B. Northup hurry and meet Mr. Bass, who is about to leave the place for two weeks. First Mr. Bass does not agree that he wrote the letter, but after assurance, Mr. Bass opens up and says the following:

I have done nothing to be ashamed of. I am the man who wrote the letter. If you have come to rescue Solomon Northup, I am glad to see you. I last saw him Christmas, a week ago today. He is a slave of Edwin Epps, a planter on Bayou Boeuf, near Holmesville, he is not known as Solomon Northup; he is called Platt. (Solomon112)

The words of Mr. Bass solve the mystery and Mr. Bass draws a map on a piece of paper showing them the way to Master Epps's plantation. Young Waddill and Henry B. Northup go to

Marksville to start the legal process to obtain Solomon's freedom. The Sheriff is directed to detain Solomon till court's decision.

Little later, Mr. Waddill comes to Henry B. Northup with a problem that Mr. Bass has told someone at the landing the reason about why he is leaving the state. The secret is out and a rumour spreads through that someone has come to take away Old Epps slave. They are afraid that if it alerts Master Epps will hide Solomon even before the Sheriff reaches the place. They hurry and request the Sheriff to be ready and gets the signature of the judge.

The next day on the plantation the Sheriff approaches Bob and asks for a slave called Platt (Solomon). As Bob directs him to Platt, the Sheriff then goes to him and asks Platt his Original name. Platt answers that his original name is Solomon Northup. The sheriff then points his finger at Henry B. Northup and asks Solomon if he can recognize him. Solomon takes some time and shouts with a full throat that it is Henry B. Northup and thanks God. Solomon knows that it is time for his liberation and is moving towards Henry B. Northup. The sheriff stops Solomon and asks questions about Solomon's family the names of his children and wife. Solomon answers all of them and goes straight to Henry B. Northup and with both hands seizes him as tears ran out of his eyes, and his throat chokes. The rest of the slaves are gazing with astonishment. After some time, Henry B. Northup says, "I'm glad to see you ...throw down the sack, your cotton-picking days are over. Come with us to the man you live with". (Solomon 114-115) Sharif asks Solomon to say goodbye to his master. Solomon hurrys to the pizza to say goodbye, Mrs. Epps is kind, but Master Epps attacks Solomon verbally:

Ah! You'd...d nigger you needn't feel so cussed tickled-you ain't gone yet-I'll see about this business at Marksville to-morrow.  
(Solomon 116)

On fourth January 1853, both the parties meet the judge in the room. Master Epps counsel Hon. H. Taylor is convinced and tells Master Epps to give up claim on Solomon. Master Epps agrees to Solomon's right to freedom. Solomon is handed over to New York authorities. Without wasting time, Henry B. Northup and Solomon get into a steamer and head down the Red River.

Henry B. Northup and Solomon reach New Orleans. Later they meet Mr. Genois the recorder and who gives them legal pass with the detailed description of Solomon and with the New Orleans City's seal on seventh January 1853. Henry B. Northup and Solomon arrive on seventeenth January 1853 in Washington D.C after passing through Richmond. They file a case against Mr. Burch for the injustice done to Solomon. But Benjamin O' Shekels and Thorn friends to Mr. Burch lie to the court and save him. Solomon regrets that:

He was acquitted, in the manner, and by such means have been described. A human tribunal has permitted him to escape; but there is another and a higher tribunal, where false testimony will not prevail, and where I am willing, so far at least as these statements are concerned, to be judged at last. (Solomon121)

Mr. Burch, Benjamin O' Shekels and Thorn are all slave traders. They file a case against Solomon, accusing him of defaming and defrauding Mr. Burch. But later take back their decision.

Henry B. Northup and Solomon come to Sandy Hill on January twenty-first night. Solomon's hard deals end, and he is delighted to be among friends. The next day Solomon, along with his acquaintances, goes to meet his wife and children at Glenn's Falls. Solomon's daughter Margaret is married and has a child, he meets her first. But she cannot recognize him, and Solomon introduces himself to his child, and she goes speechless. Then he meets Elizabeth and Anne hurries home from the hotel to see her husband. They all embrace Solomon, and happy tears flowed. Later the family sits together and share various incidents that they have to go through in that long separation. Solomon's son Alonzo is away and wrote to his mother a few days back that he is doing well and will come home with sufficient money to purchase the freedom of his father. Solomon's family knows that he is held captive in slavery through Clem Ray's visit. But they do not know the exact location of Solomon. Anne says at times his daughters use to come home in tears after their geography class, where they are told the conditions of the slaves on the plantations. They use to weep and pray for their father all through the years.

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