

from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (4)

1 I was now about twelve years old, and the thought of being a slave for life began to bear
2 heavily upon my heart. Just about this time, I got hold of a book entitled “The Columbian Orator.”
3 Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book. Among much of other interesting matter, I found
4 in it a dialogue between a master and his slave. The slave was represented as having run away
5 from his master three times. The dialogue represented the conversation which took place between
6 them, when the slave was retaken the third time. In this dialogue, the whole argument in behalf of
7 slavery was brought forward by the master, all of which was disposed of by the slave. The slave
8 was made to say some very smart as well as impressive things in reply to his master—things
9 which had the desired though unexpected effect; for the conversation resulted in the voluntary
10 emancipation of the slave on the part of the master.

11 In the same book, I met with one of Sheridan’s mighty speeches on and in behalf of
12 Catholic emancipation. These were choice documents to me. I read them over and over again
13 with unabated interest. They gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had
14 frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance. The moral which I
15 gained from the dialogue was the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder.
16 What I got from Sheridan was a bold denunciation of slavery, and a powerful vindication of
17 human rights. The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet
18 the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one

19 difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than the one of which I was relieved.

20 The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in

21 no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to

22 Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I loathed

23 them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men. As I read and contemplated

24 the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would

25 follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable

26 anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse

27 rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy.

28 It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of

29 agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I

30 preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Any thing, no matter what, to get

31 rid of thinking! It was this everlasting thinking of my condition that tormented me. There

32 was no getting rid of it. It was pressed upon me by every object within sight or hearing,

33 animate or inanimate. The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal

34 wakefulness. Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every

35 sound, and seen in every thing. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my

36 wretched condition. I saw nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without hearing it, and

37 felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled in every calm, breathed in

38 every wind, and moved in every storm.