

Life with Aunt Betsey

Five-year-old Fred Bailey knelt on the hard-packed dirt outside the cabin. He held a kernel of corn between his brown fingers. “Come squirrel, squirrel!” he said softly, making a soft chirruping sound in his throat.

A red squirrel, running along the rail fence, stopped and flicked its tail. Fred chirruped again, and the squirrel jumped to the ground. Then Fred held himself still, and the squirrel inched itself closer to him step by careful step.

A slight noise from the cabin broke the spell. The squirrel scampered away even before Fred’s grandmother, Aunt Betsey Bailey, appeared in the doorway with a large wooden bucket.

“Here, Fred,” she said. “Will you take this bucket and get me some water from the well?”

Fred popped the kernel of corn into his mouth and ran to his grandmother. “Yes, I’ll get some water,” he said proudly, taking the bucket from his

grandmother's outstretched hands.

He went to the well and lowered the bucket in, then brought it up brimming full of water. He unhooked the bucket carefully, trying not to spill any of the water. As he trudged slowly toward the cabin, a little water sloshed over his dusty hands.

"That's fine, Fred," his grandmother called encouragingly.

She spoke a moment too soon. Suddenly Fred stumbled over a tree root in his path. He kept a tight hold on the bucket, but most of the water spilled on the ground.

Aunt Betsey made a clicking sound with her tongue. "You're lucky Old Master wasn't around to see you, Fred," she said, "or you'd get a licking for sure."

Fred shivered. He had never seen the person Aunt Betsey referred to, but he knew he and his grandmother both belonged to a man named Captain Anthony. They were the man's slaves, and he could do whatever he wanted to do with them. He could even take Fred away from his grandmother.

"When you're big enough, you'll have to go to the home place," Aunt Betsey told all the children in her care.

This home place was a large Maryland plantation situated on the River Wye. It was the largest of many farms owned by Colonel Edward Lloyd. Fred's master,

Captain Anthony, was chief clerk for Colonel Lloyd, though he owned several farms in Talbot County himself.

Aunt Betsey had worked hard for Captain Anthony for many years. When she grew too old to do field work, he had moved her to a cabin on one of his most distant farms. There she cared for all the babies born to his slave women. More often than not, these babies were her grandchildren, but he didn't realize this. If he had known, he would have made other plans for them. He separated children from their mothers to break their family ties.

Fred, having been placed in his grandmother's care, was luckier than many other enslaved children. Aunt Betsey cared for him lovingly, and he loved her in return. He respected and admired her, too, because she was held in high esteem in the neighborhood. Also, she had a reputation for being a very skilled fisherwoman. The shad and herring just seemed to jump into her nets.

Aunt Betsey was the only mother Fred had known. He didn't remember ever seeing his mother. She came occasionally to visit Aunt Betsey, but always after Fred was fast asleep. This was the only time she could come because she was hired out as a field hand to a Mr. Stewart, who lived many miles away. Unless she could somehow borrow a mule to ride, she couldn't

cover the distance back and forth in time to be present for roll call at dawn.

Fred turned back toward the well with the bucket. This time he transferred the full bucket safely to his grandmother's hands. He followed her into the cabin and watched as she poured the water into a large black pot. She hung the pot from an iron hook dangling from a crane and swung it into the fireplace, where a small fire was burning.

"While the water's coming to a boil, we'll go down to the river to catch us a mess of herring," Aunt Betsey said.

"Both of us?" cried Fred. His grandmother seldom invited him to go fishing.

"You're the only person I see around," Aunt Betsey answered.

Fred clapped his hands. "I'll go get the new net!" he cried.

He could see the net she had finished making the night before, hanging from a post of her pine bedstead. It looked to him just like the oriole's nest that swung in a willow tree near the river.

"I was thinking of selling this new net," his grandmother objected.

Selling nets which she made was almost the only way she had of making money. She had a reputation for making nets strong and tight and could sell them

in the villages thereabouts.

“Do you have to sell the net?” asked Fred. He hoped that Aunt Betsey didn’t need the money from the sale of one net now and could wait until allowance day.

At the end of each month, the enslaved people from the different farms got their monthly allowance of salt, corn, and pickled pork at the “home place.” The amount given was never generous, and especially not to a slave like Aunt Betsey, who did not work in the fields. The allotment for the children in her care was even less.

So Aunt Betsey not only fished but raised a little patch of sweet potatoes, and she always had food for hungry stomachs. The few pennies she made from selling her fishnets went for molasses or some other kind of sweetening. She always bought the molasses at the end of the month, when she had an excuse to pass through the village.

“I’ll see,” Aunt Betsey said in answer to Fred’s question.

She couldn’t read, but she could count and she kept a calendar of sorts. Her calendar was a square of clay beside the fireplace, where she scratched a little line every day with a sharp stick. At the beginning of each month she rubbed out the lines and started fresh on the new month.

The fire was not very bright, but except for the open door, it provided the only light in the windowless log cabin. Aunt Betsey had to kneel with her face very close to the hearth in order to see her scratches. When she looked at them she found that the month was only half over. This meant she would have time to make other nets to sell.

“You can get the new net,” she told Fred.

Standing on tiptoe, Fred lifted the net carefully from the bedpost. He hugged it tightly against his body, afraid he might catch it on something and tear it.

“I declare, a person would think you are carrying a baby,” his grandmother said.

They walked down the hill on which the cabin stood. In the valley below, beside the river, they came to a water mill, where the villagers brought their corn to be ground into meal. One of Fred’s favorite pastimes was watching the huge millwheel turn slowly round and round. Watching the wheel was also a favorite pastime of the other children in Aunt Betsey’s household. Two of them were watching it now as Fred and his grandmother came by. Two others were trying to fish in the millpond with string and hooks made of bent wire.

“Where are you going?” the children cried with one voice.

“We’re going fishing,” said Fred, who knew from

experience that they wouldn't catch anything with their baitless hooks.

"May we go, too?" asked the others, but Aunt Betsey shook her head.

"So many of you together would scare the fish away," she said. "You may go sometime later. Just wait awhile."

Fred took his grandmother's hand and squeezed it. She squeezed back, then freed herself. "Come," she said. "We're wasting time."

She walked on downstream, until suddenly she changed her course and waded into the water up to her waist. Fred started to follow her, but the current pulled at his legs and he felt frightened. "It's too strong for me," he said. He started to cry because he had wanted to hold one end of the new net.

"There's nothing to cry about," Aunt Betsey said, coming to take the net. "The rains have flooded the river, that's all. I'm having a little trouble myself."

Fred went back to the bank and sat down. After a few minutes, he started to pick the daisies that grew within arm's reach. When he had a lap full of them, he plaited their stems together to make a crown.

He was still working on the crown when Aunt Betsey came ashore, her net half full of small, wriggly fish. "We have enough for supper and some to salt down," she said.



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Fred got up, careless of the daisies that scattered around him. He looked gloatingly at his grandmother's catch. "That's surely a fine mess of fish," he said, licking his lips as if already tasting the fish stew he would have for supper. He was hungry, even though he'd had a cold sweet potato to eat at midday.

The thought of the stew lent wings to Fred's feet. He raced on ahead of his grandmother but stopped short at the top of the hill. In front of the cabin he saw a horse-drawn wagon with a white man sitting on the seat.

Fred rushed back to tell his grandmother. "We have company, Grandmother," he cried. "There's a white man waiting in a wagon. What do you suppose he wants?"

Aunt Betsey put her free hand up to her eyes as if to shade them. "I don't have to suppose, Fred," she said, and her voice sounded as if it were cracking. "I'm afraid I know."

She quickened her steps. Fred ran to keep up with her and tugged at her skirt. "What's the matter, Grandmother?" he asked anxiously. "What is it?"

Aunt Betsey freed herself gently. "You'll find out soon enough," she said. "Now run away and play until I call you." As Fred stopped in the path, confused, she walked on toward the cabin and the man waiting for her in the wagon.