

Day 4

Section 4: Hope Rises and Falls

Chapters 15-18

Vocabulary and Terms:

Picayune - *trivial, petty, of little value*

Cotillion - *a fancy dance, a ball*

Vociferously- *noisily*

Coquette - *a flirt*

Connubial - *pertaining to marriage*

Gallows - *a structure with two upright posts and a crossbar at the top, used for hanging criminals*

Miasmas - *smelly and acrid cloud*

Succor - *help*

Prostrate - *laying flat, having thrown oneself down*

Taciturn - *saying little*

Profligate - *recklessly extravagant, a spendthrift*

Countenance - *the face, or the expression on the face*

Flayed - *with skin stripped away*

Abhorrence - *strong hatred*

Libertine- *a person with very liberal behavior against usual standards*

Matching:

- | | |
|-----------------|---|
| 1. picayune | A. with skin stripped away |
| 2. cotillion | B. a structure with two upright posts and a crossbar at the top, used for hanging criminals |
| 3. vociferously | C. help |
| 4. coquette | D. noisily |
| 5. connubial | E. recklessly extravagant, a spendthrift |
| 6. gallows | F. laying flat, having thrown oneself down |
| 7. miasmas | G. saying little |
| 8. succor | H. the face, or the expression on the face |
| 9. prostrate | I. a person with very liberal behavior against usual standards |
| 10. taciturn | J. pertaining to marriage |
| 11. profligate | K. smelly and acrid cloud |
| 12. countenance | L. trivial, petty, of little value |
| 13. flayed | M. strong hatred |
| 14. abhorrence | N. a fancy dance, a ball |
| 15. libertine | O. a flirt |

Detail Questions:

Chapter 15

- 1. When Epps finally decided Solomon was not good enough at picking cotton, he hired Solomon out to other plantations to perform a different job. What was this job, and was Solomon successful?
For which particular product was this particular plantation owner known?**
- 2. During the entire calendar year, what is the time that the slaves look forward to the most? Why? Describe the time of the year for the slaves.
What other gift do owners give their slaves at the Christmas holidays?**
- 3. What particular contribution to the Christmas dance did Solomon provide?
Did his violin provide anything else? If so, what did it provide?**
- 4. Describe marriage among the slaves.**
- 5. Recall that Burch renamed Solomon “Platt” upon purchasing him. Why is he referred to as Platt Ford, then Platt Tibbeats, then Platt Epps? (p.72, p. 127)
How does this naming practice apply to Solomon Northup’s true name, and the man who ultimately freed him, Henry B. Northup?**

Chapter 16

- 6. What did the owners of larger plantations have that Epps did not; who helped the owners with more land and therefore more slaves?**
- 7. Who were directly under the overseers?**
- 8. Epps gave Solomon the title of driver. Did Solomon do exactly as the position required?
How?**
- 9. Solomon still hoped for escape, and his hope hinged on getting a letter mailed north.
What were some obstacles in his way?
How long did it take him to secretly get a piece of paper on which to write a letter?**
- 10. Solomon cautiously began to trust a man by the name of Armsby who came looking for employment as an overseer for Epps. He arranged to have Armsby deliver a letter to the post office, and said he would bring the letter soon. Was the plan successful?
Why or why not?**

Chapter 17

- 11. What are “patrollers?”**
- 12. If a slave escapes the master’s plantation, does he or she regain freedom?**
- 13. Before Solomon arrived at Bayou Boeuf, there was a mass escape of slaves planned. What was the outcome, and how did this knowledge affect Solomon’s feelings and actions regarding mass escape?**

Chapter 18

- 14. Solomon received a strong whipping from Epps as a result of a trivial reason. What was the reason Epps whipped Solomon so severely?**
- 15. Who was the victim of the most horrific whipping Solomon ever witnessed?**
- 16. What were the circumstances surrounding Patsey’s beating?**
- 17. After this beating, how did Patsey’s demeanor change?**
- 18. Was the behavior of the slave owners specific to them, or did it filter through the owner’s family?**

Discussion Questions:

- 1. In your opinion, how is Solomon able to keep any glimmer of hope of his freedom alive? How does he not succumb to his current fate, stopping any and all attempts at regaining his freedom?**
- 2. What kind of man took the overseer positions? What were men in this position like? How did they behave toward the slaves?**

Audio Clip For Section 4:

Chapter 18

p. 151- 154

After Patsey’s Flogging

The clip shows the effects of Epps’ jealousy of Patsey, and how a minor offense could lead to horrific treatment of the slaves. She went to her friend to get a piece of soap, and Epps’ jealousy led him to believe she was there to visit the man of the house instead.

Matching: Key

1. L
2. N
3. D
4. O
5. J
6. B
7. K
8. C
9. F
10. G
11. E
12. H
13. A
14. M
15. I

Detail Questions: Key

Chapter 15

- 1. When Epps finally decided Solomon was not good enough at picking cotton, he hired Solomon out to other plantations to perform a different job. What was this job, and was Solomon successful?**

The job was cutting sugar cane, and Solomon was very successful. As evidence of the success, for three years Solomon lead a gang of fifty to one hundred slaves in cane-cutting. (p 122)

- For which particular product was this particular plantation owner known?**

The finest variety of white sugar was produced on this plantation, owned by Hawkins. (p124)

- 2. During the entire calendar year, what is the time that the slaves look forward to the most? Why? Describe the time of the year for the slaves.**

The slaves look forward to Christmas time as their single break in the year. All of the slaves relish the light mood and forgot their usual troubles. As Solomon says in his book, "Epps allowed us three - others [owners] allowed four, five, and six days...It is the time of feasting, and frolicking, and fiddling - the carnival season of the children of bondage." (p125). Slaves from nearby plantations were invited to celebrate, dance, and feast together. The slave owners would rotate the hosting duties of such a celebration.. Slaves wear their best clothes and any adornments they had. (p125)

- What other gift do owners give their slaves at the Christmas holidays?**

The slaves receive passes to go visiting within a small distance. The slaves may choose to stay and labor, in which case they could keep their wages, but this option was usually not chosen. (p130)

3. What particular contribution to the Christmas dance did Solomon provide?

He played his violin.(p127)

Did his violin provide anything else? If so, what did it provide?

Solomon's violin playing was requested by other plantation owners for the Christmas holidays, and this earned him money (as well as compensation for his owner Epps). Solomon was well known in the region for his violin playing, and received very warm welcomes because of it. The violin provided Solomon with donations, respite from field work, and opportunities to enjoy happiness while playing, but it also provided solace and comfort, bringing him peace in his circumstances. (p127)

4. Describe marriage among the slaves.

The only requirement to get "married" was the consent of both owners. There was no ceremony to speak of, and no rules requiring only one spouse. Bigamy did not apply, and neither did divorce, as slaves were seen as property and not people. (p130)

5. Recall that Burch renamed Solomon "Platt" upon purchasing him. Why is he referred to as Platt Ford, then Platt Tibbeats, then Platt Epps? (p.72, p. 127)

Slaves take the surname of their masters. (p72)

How does this naming practice apply to Solomon Northup's true name, and the man who ultimately freed him, Henry B. Northup?

Henry B. Northup was a relative of the family who owned Solomon's father. Solomon's father, Mintus Northup, was given his owner's surname of Northup, thus giving it to Solomon. (p1)

Chapter 16

6. What did the owners of larger plantations have that Epps did not; who helped the owners with more land and therefore more slaves?

The owners of the larger plantations required the use of overseers to supervise their slaves since there were so many more to keep under watch. Epps, having a smaller plantation and fewer slaves, did not have the need for an overseer and therefore acted as overseer himself. (p132)

7. Who were directly under the overseers?

The drivers, who were black men, had their own work to do as well as whip any slave under their supervision who was not doing his or her own required work. If the driver did not whip a slave as the overseer thought they should, the driver himself got whipped. (p133)

8. Epps gave Solomon the title of driver. Did Solomon do exactly as the position required? How?

He did not perform his duties as a driver should, in an effort to ease the suffering of his fellow slaves. When Epps was around, Solomon would not seem to show any lenience, whipping as he knew Epps would expect. Solomon satisfied Epps and was lenient on his fellow slaves by learning how to whip hard and fast (to satisfy Epps) but just barely miss the skin of the slave being whipped. The slaves and Solomon had arranged for the slave being “whipped” in this manner to act as though the whipping had actually happened, screaming as if in pain. (p133-134)

9. Solomon still hoped for escape, and his hope hinged on getting a letter mailed north.

What were some obstacles in his way?

He knew that slaves were not allowed off their owners’ plantations without a pass. He was not allowed pen, ink, or paper, and had to conceal the fact that he knew how to read and write. (p136)

How long did it take him to secretly get a piece of paper on which to write a letter?

It took him nine years. (p136)

10. Solomon cautiously began to trust a man by the name of Armsby who came looking for employment as an overseer for Epps. He arranged to have Armsby deliver a letter to the post office, and said he would bring the letter soon. Was the plan successful?

Why or why not?

Solomon had the letter written and in his pocket while he was making arrangements with Armsby, but did not yet have complete trust in him. The next day, the distrust Solomon still had for Armsby was proven correct when Armsby told Epps about the arrangements he and Solomon had made. Epps confronted Solomon, and in an effort to save his own life, Solomon lied directly to him. Solomon said that he had no ink or paper; therefore, he could not have written a letter, and he had only spoken to Armsby minimally. He also pointed out that Armsby had wanted the job of overseer for Epps, and one way he could entice Epps to hire him was to make it seem that his slaves needed supervision so they would not run away. Epps finally believed Solomon, and after Epps left, Solomon burned the letter. (p137-139)

Chapter 17

11. What are “patrollers?”

These are groups of men who are charged with capturing and whipping any slave they suspect of being away from the master’s plantation without a pass. They are armed with guns and whips, and accompanied by dogs. The patrollers have set distances they are responsible for guarding and are compensated by the plantation owners in the vicinity. (p140)

12. If a slave escapes the master's plantation, does he or she regain freedom?

If the escapee is extraordinarily lucky he might. More likely, however, the slave will either drown in the bayou (having not been allowed to learn to swim), or be asked for a pass by a white man and be imprisoned because he did not have one (as in Wiley's attempt). After Wiley's subsequent return to Epps' plantation and brutal whipping, he did not try to escape again. Outcomes of a slave attempting escape could be even worse, as with Solomon's acquaintance Augustus who was mauled by dogs to the death. (p78, p142, p144)

13. Before Solomon arrived at Bayou Boeuf, there was a mass escape of slaves planned. What was the outcome, and how did this knowledge affect Solomon's feelings and actions regarding mass escape?

A black man named Lew Cheney, whom Solomon had met and described as "shrewd" and "full of treachery" (p146), organized a group of slaves large enough to overpower any obstacle in the way of ultimate escape to Mexico. The group's hiding place was discovered, and Cheney realized his plan would fail. In an attempt to save his own life, Cheney turned on the slaves he himself had organized and told the masters that the slaves had planned to kill every white person on the bayou. The slaves were then hanged, as was anyone who attempted to help them. Each time a mass escape plan was hatched, Solomon was always against it. (p147)

Chapter 18

14. Solomon received a strong whipping from Epps as a result of a trivial reason. What was the reason Epps whipped Solomon so severely?

Another plantation owner (O'Neil) had shown interest in purchasing Solomon from Epps, and a fellow slave overheard the conversation regarding the potential sale. This slave, Aunt Phebe, relayed the conversation to Solomon, who replied that he hoped the sale would be successful. Unable to reach an agreement on price, the sale never occurred, but Epps was furious to learn that one of his slaves wanted to leave. He then whipped him brutally. (p150)

15. Who was the victim of the most horrific whipping Solomon ever witnessed?

Patsey. (p151)

16. What were the circumstances surrounding Patsey's beating?

While the slaves were washing clothes in the bayou, Patsey disappeared, and no one knew where she had gone. She had gone to a neighboring plantation, being friends with the owner's black wife. The jealousy in Epps led him to believe that Patsey did not go to see her friend, but instead went to the owner. When confronted by Epps, she told the truth, that she had gone to get a piece of soap because Mistress Epps never gave her any. Epps did not believe her, and instructed Solomon to put four stakes in the ground to which Patsey would be tied. She was ordered to strip, then was tied facedown to the stakes. Solomon was ordered to whip her, until he finally refused to do it anymore. Epps then took the whip himself, and whipped her much harder until her strength was gone and her pleas for mercy stopped. Her struggling ceased to the point Solomon thought she was dying. The only reason Epps stopped whipping Patsey was his own exhaustion. (p152-153)

17. After this beating, how did Patsey's demeanor change?

She was never the same after the beating. The young woman with a great inner strength and full of joy now was silent and much aged, more apt to cry than laugh. To Solomon, it would have been a blessing for her to have died then, so as not to suffer as she did afterwards. She knew that there was a land of freedom in the North, but it was too far for her to ever realistically dream of being. To her, it was "an enchanted region, the Paradise of the earth." (p155)

18. Was the behavior of the slave owners specific to them, or did it filter through the owner's family?

The owner's behavior was observed and learned by the owner's children, who then acted as an owner or overseer even with slaves much older than they. The children learned what they saw, and imitated how their fathers treated the slaves, using belittling tones, words, and actions. (p155-156)

Discussion Questions: Key

Correct answers include the following, and additional correct answers are possible.

1. In your opinion, how is Solomon able to keep any glimmer of hope of his freedom alive?

How does he not succumb to his current fate, stopping any and all attempts at regaining his freedom?

He knows he is a free man, but he is the only one anywhere nearby who knows this. He has seen and experienced things he never in his most vivid nightmares ever imagined he would, yet he knows that this is not his place in the world. He knows he must keep trying if he is ever to return home to his family. He has times of near hopelessness, but his desire and will to get home never completely leaves him. His violin helps him to cope, and the friendships he had made helped as well. Solomon knew he came from the freedom that many of the slaves would never see but could imagine, and he had sheer determination to regain his own.

2. What kind of man took the overseer positions? What were men in this position like? How did they behave toward the slaves?

Overseers were white men, on horseback and were armed with guns, knives, whips, with dogs in tow. They were very cruel and heartless, with the single goal of providing a good crop at whatever the personal cost to the slaves. Most were poor and without the benefit of education, and this likely led to their cruelty toward the slaves. Their cruelty and authority over the slaves allowed the overseers someone to look down upon. (p132)