

Lina Hunter
Ex-Slave, Age about 90
270 Bailey Street
Athens, Georgia

Lina Hunter's weather-beaten house nestles at the foot of a long hill, and several large chinaberry trees furnish shade for her well-kept yard. As the visitor hesitated before the rickety front steps someone called from inside the house, "Chile, do be keerful on dem old steps 'cause dey might fall wid you; dey done went through wid some of dese chillun here."

The tall mulatto woman who came to the door had tiny plaits of white hair that covered her head in no apparent design. Her faded print dress was clean, and she wore badly scuffed brogan shoes several sizes too large on her stockingless feet. In answer to an inquiry she replied: "Dis is Lina's house, and I is Lina. Have a cheer out here on de porch, please, mam, 'cause de gals is ironin' in de house and dem fire buckets sho make it hot in dar."

Lina readily agreed to tell of her life in the ante-bellum period. "I 'members all 'bout slavery time," she laughed, "cause I was right dar. Course I warn't grown-up, but I was big enough to help Great-granny Rose look atter all dem other slave chillun whilst deir mammies[Pg 254] and daddies was in de field at wuk.

"Anne and Peter Billups was my mammy and daddy, and my granddaddy and grandmammy was Washin'ton and Tiller Billups; all of 'em belonged to Old Marster Jack Billups. Marse Jack stayed in Athens, but his plantation, whar I was borned and whar all my folks was borned and raised, was 'way down in Oglethorpe County. I don't rightly know how old I is, 'cause all Marster's old records is done got lost or 'stroyed, evvy blessed one of 'em, but I'se been here a mighty long time.

"Honey, dat old plantation was sho one big place. Back of de big house, whar de overseer lived, was just rows and rows of slave cabins. Dey stacked 'em up out of big logs jus' lak dey made hog-pen fences. All de cracks 'twixt de logs was chinked up tight wid red mud and, let me tell you, Honey, dey was keerful to lay on so much red mud over dem sticks dat chimblies on our place never did ketch fire lak dey did on some of de places whar dey done things sort of shiftless lak. Dem cabins had two rooms and a shed room 'crost de back whar day done de cookin'. Two famblies lived in evvy cabin.

"Dey allus had plenty to cook, 'cause dere was plenty of victuals raised on Marse Jack's place. Chillun was all fed up at de big house whar Marse Garner, de overseer, lived. Deir mammies was 'lowed to come in[Pg 255] from de fields in time to cook dinner for de menfolks, but dey didn't git deir chillun back home 'til atter supper. Granny Rose had 'em all day, and she had to see dat dey had de right sort of victuals to make chillun grow fast and strong. Chillun et out of wooden trays, and, Honey, dey sho was some sight; dey looked jus' lak pig troughs. Dey poured peas, cabbage, or whatever de chillun was to eat right in dat trough on top of a passel of cornbread. For supper chillun jus' had milk and bread, but dere was allus plenty of it. Marse Jack had lots of cows, and old Aunt Mary didn't have no other job but to churn enough so dere would allus be plenty of milk and butter, 'cause Marse Jack had done said milk was good for chillun and dat us was to have it to drink any time us wanted it.

"Evvybody cooked on fireplaces den. I jus' wish you could see dat big old fireplace in de big house kitchen; you could stand up in it. It had long racks clear acrost de inside for de pots what dey biled in to hang on. Bakin' was done in thick iron skilletts dat had heavy lids. You sot 'em on coals and piled more coals all over 'em. Us had somepin dat most folks didn't have; dat was long handled muffin pans. Dey had a lid dat fitted down tight, and you jus' turned 'em over in de fire 'til de muffins was cooked on both sides. I had[Pg 256] dem old muffin irons here, but de lid got broke off and dese here boys done lost 'em diggin' in de ground wid 'em. Dem victuals cooked on open fireplaces was mighty fine, and I wishes you could have a chance to see jus' how nice dey was.

"Evvy kind of vegetable us knowed anything 'bout was raised right dar on de place and dey had big old fields of corn, oats, rye, and wheat. Us had lots of fruit trees on de plantation too. Dere warn't no runnin' off to de store evvy time dere was a special meal to be got up. Coffee, sugar, salt, and black pepper was de most Marse Jack had to buy in de way of victuals. Course dey was hard to git in war times. Parched corn and okra seed was ground together for coffee, and us had to git up dirt under old smokehouses and bile it down for salt. Dere was allus a little sugar 'round de sides of de syrup barr'ls, and us had to make out wid dat hot red pepper 'til atter de war was done over a good long time, 'fore dere was any more black pepper shipped in. Spite of all dat, Honey, dem was good old days.

"Marster raised enough cows, sheep, hogs, chickens, and turkeys for us to have all de meat us needed. He had lots of mules and oxen too. Dey used de mules for 'most of de[Pg 257] plowin' and for goin' to mill, and don't forgit it took plenty of goin' to mill to feed as many Niggers as our Marster had. Lordy, Lady! I never knowed how many slaves he owned. Oxen pulled dem two-wheeled carts dey hauled in de craps wid, and I has rid to town in a ox-cart many a time. Dem old oxen was enough to make a preacher lose his best 'ligion. Dey had a heap of mean ways, but de wust thing dey done was to run spang down in de water evvy time dey come to a crick. It never mattered how deep it was, and you might holler all day, but dey warn't coming out of dat water 'till dey was

good and ready. Dat happened evvy time dey saw a crick, but dere warn't nothin' us could do 'bout it, for Marse Jack sho never 'lowed nobody to lay deir paws on his stock.

"Folks wove all deir cloth at home dem days. Dey made up plenty of cotton cloth for hot weather, and for de cold wintertime, dere warn't nothin' warmer dat us knowed about dan de cloth dey made out of home-raised wool and cotton. Marster kept a slave dat didn't have nothin' else to do but make shoes for evvybody on de place. Yes, mam, Honey, dey tanned de hide evvy time dey kilt a cow. Leather was tanned wid whiteoak bark. Chillun's shoes was finished off wid brass knobs on de toes, and us was sho mighty dressed up Niggers when us got on dem shoes wid deir shiny knobs. Little gals' dresses[Pg 258] was made wid long skirts gathered on to plain waisties. Dere warn't no showin' de legs lak dey does now. Little boys had red and black jeans suits made wid waisties and britches sewed together in front but wid a long buttoned-up openin' in de back. Most of de other places jus' put long shirts on little boys, but dat warn't de way dey done on our place, 'cause us didn't belong to no pore folks. Our Marster had plenty and he did lak to see his Niggers fixed up nice. Course in summertime none of de chillun didn't wear nothin' but little slips, so dey could keep cool, but in winter it was diffunt. Honey, dem old balmoral petticoats was some sight, but dey was sho warm as hell. I seed a piece of one of mine not long ago whar I had done used it to patch up a old quilt. 'Omans' dresses was made jus' about lak dis one I got on now, 'ceptin' I didn't have enough cloth to make de skirt full as dem old-time clothes used to be." The old woman stood up to show just how her dress was fashioned. The skirt, sewed to a plain, close-fitting waist, was very full in the back, but plain across the front. Lina called attention to an opening on the left side of the front. "See here, Chile," she said, "here's a sho 'nough pocket. Jus' let me turn it wrong-side-out to show you how big it is. Why, I used a whole 25 pound flour sack to make[Pg 259] it 'cause I don't lak none of dese newfangled little pockets. I lak things de way I was raised. Dis pocket hangs down inside and nobody don't see it. De chilluns fusses 'bout my big pocket, but it ain't in none of deir dresses, and I'se sho gwine to wear 'em 'til dey is wore out to a gnat's heel.

"Chillun never had to wuk on our plantation 'til dey was big enough to go to de fields, and dat was when dey was around 12 to 14 years old. Dey jus' played 'round de yards and down by de wash-place dat was a little ways off from de big house on a branch dat run from de big spring. On wash days dat was a busy place, wid lots of 'omans bending over dem great big wash pots and de biggest old wooden tubs I ever seed. Dere was plenty racket 'round de battlin' block whar dey beat de dirt out of de clothes, and dey would sing long as dey was a-washin'.

"Marster was sho good to his Niggers all de time. Course he made 'em wuk 'less dey was sick. Chillun never had nothin' to do 'cept eat, sleep, and play. Evvy time Marse Jack come out to his plantation he brung candy for all de pickaninnies, and, Honey, it warn't in no little sacks neither; dere was allus plenty for 'em all, and it was a mighty big crowd of us. Marster loved to come out on Sundays to see us chillun git our[Pg

260] heads combed. Honey, dere sho was hollerin' on dat place when dey started wukin' on us wid dem jim crow combs what was made lak a curry comb 'ceppin' dey warn't quite as wide acrost. When dem jim crow combs got stuck in dat tangled, kinky wool, damn if dem chillun didn't yell, and Marster would laugh and tell Granny Rose to comb it good.

"Granny Rose larnt me to keep clean and fix myself up nice, and, Honey, I ain't got too old to primp up now. One thing dis old Nigger ain't never done is to put hair straightener on her head, 'cause de Blessed Lord sont me here wid kinky hair, and I'se gwine 'way from here wid dat same old kinky hair. It's white now, but dat ain't no fault of mine. Honey, I sho do trust dat Good Lord. Why, I 'member when I used to pull out my own teeth; I jus' tied a string 'round 'em, laid down on my bed, and said, 'Lord, I is in your hands,' and den I would give dat string a hard yank and out come dem damn teeth.

"Yes, mam, I'se seed slaves sold. Dey jus' put dem Niggers up on de block and bid 'em off. A smart worker brought a big price, and a good breedin' 'oman sho did fetch de money, 'cause all de white folks did lak to have plenty chillun 'round. Dem breedin' 'omans never done no wuk a t'all; dey made other slaves wait[Pg 261] on 'em 'til atter deir babies was borned. Slave 'omans what had babies was sont back from de fields in de mornin' and atter dinner so deir babies could suck 'til atter dey was big enough to eat bread and milk; den dey was kept wid de other chillun for Granny Rose to keer for.

"Slaves didn't even git married lak folks does now. Dere warn't none of dem newfangled licenses to buy. All dey had to do was tell Marster dey wanted to marry up. If it was all right wid him he had 'em jump over a broom and dey was done married. Slaves couldn't git out and do no courtin' on other plantations widout deir marsters knowed it, 'cause dey had to have passes to leave de place whar dey lived. If dey was brash enough to go off widout no pass de paterollers would cotch 'em for sho, and dey would nigh beat 'em to death. Dat didn't stop courtin', 'specially on our place, 'cause dey jus' tuk anybody dey laked; it didn't matter whose man or 'oman dey had.

"Marster had a big old ginhouse on de plantation about 2 miles from de big house, but I never seed in it, 'cause dey didn't 'low 'omans and chillun 'round it. De menfolks said dey hitched up mules to run it, and dat dey had a cotton press inside de ginhouse. Dey said it was a heap of trouble to git rid of all dem old cotton-seeds dat piled up so fast in ginnin' time. Dere was a great big wuk-shop on de place too, whar dey fixed evvy[Pg 262]thing, and dat was whar dey made coffins when anybody died. Yes, mam, evvything was made at home, even down to de coffins.

"Dere didn't many folks die out back in dem good old days, 'cause dey was made to take keer of deirselves. Dey had to wuk hard, but dey et plenty and went to bed reg'lar evvy night in wuk time. When one of 'em did die out, deir measure was tuk and a coffin was made up and blackened 'til it looked right nice. Whenever dere was a corpse on de place

Marster didn't make nobody do no wuk, 'cept jus' look atter de stock, 'til atter de buryin'. Dey fixed up de corpses nice. Yes, mam, sho as you is borned, dey did; dey made new clothes for 'em and buried 'em decent in de graveyard on de place. Marse Jack seed to dat. Dey put de coffin on a wagon, and de folks walked to de graveyard. Dere was crowds of 'em; dey come from jus' evvywhar. A preacher, or some member of deir marster's fambly, said a prayer, de folks sung a hymn, and it was all over. 'Bout de biggest buryin' us ever had on our place was for a 'oman dat drapped down in de path and died when she was comin' in from de field to nuss her baby. Yes, mam, she was right on de way to Granny Rose's cabin in de big house yard.

"No, mam, I ain't forgot when de Yankees come to our place. Dat was right atter de end of de war, not long atter us had been told 'bout freedom. When us[Pg 263] heard dey was on deir way us tuk and hid all de stuff us could, but dey sho tore up dat place. Dey tuk all de meat out of de smokehouse and give it to de Niggers, but deir bellies was already full and dey didn't need it, so dey give it back to Marse Jack soon as dem sojers was gone. 'Fore dey left dem Yankee sojers tuk Marse Jack's mules and horses slap out of de plows and rid 'em off, and left deir old wore-out stock right dar.

"Freedom didn't make so many changes on our place right at fust, 'cause most of de slaves stayed right on dar, and things went on jus' lak dey had 'fore dere was any war. Marse Jack had done told 'em dey was free, but dat dem what wanted to stay would be tuk keer of same as 'fore de war. Dere warn't many what left neither, 'cause Marse Jack had been so good to evvy one of 'em dey didn't want to go 'way.

"Honey, back in dem good old days us went to church wid our white folks. Slaves sot in de gallery or in de back of de church. I'se been to dat old Cherokee Corners Church more times dan I knows how to count, but de fust baptizin' I ever seed was at de old St. Jean church; dere was jus' three or four baptized dat day, but Lordy, I never did hear such prayin', shoutin', and singin', in all my born days. One old 'oman come up out of dat crick a-shoutin' 'bout she was walk[Pg 264]in' through de pearly gates and wearin' golden slippers, but I looked down at her foots and what she had on looked more lak brogans to me. I kin still hear our old songs, but it's jus' now and den dat dey come back to my mind."

For a moment Lina was quiet, then she said, "Honey, I wants to smoke my old pipe so bad I kin most taste it, but how in hell kin I smoke when I ain't had no 'baccy in two days? Chile, ain't you got no 'baccy wid you, jus' a little 'baccy? You done passed de nighest store 'bout 2 miles back toward town," she said, "but if you will pay for some 'baccy for Lina, some of dese good-for-nothin' chillun kin sho go git it quick and, whilst dey's dar, dey might as well git me a little coffee too, if you kin spare de change." The cash was supplied by the visitor, and Lina soon started the children off running. "If you stops airy a minute," she told them, "I'se gwine take de hide offen your backs, sho' as

you is borned." As soon as they were out of sight, she returned to her chair and started talking again.

"Yes, mam, Honey, things went on 'bout de same old way atter de war." Suddenly the old woman leaped to her feet and began shouting, "Bless God A'mighty! Praise de Lord! I knows de key to prayers. I'se done prayed jus' dis mornin' for de Lord to send me some 'baccy and coffee, and God is done sont Missy wid de money to answer my [Pg 265] prayer. Praise de Lord! I'se glad I'se here, 'cause I coulda been gone and missed my 'baccy and coffee. Praise God! I'se gwine to smoke dat damned old pipe one more time." She seized the visitor by the shoulder as she shouted, "I sho laks your looks, but you may be de devil for all I knows, and you may be fixin' to put me in de chaingang wid all dis here writin', but" here she gave the startled visitor a shake that almost pulled her out of the chair, "Damn, if I don't lak you anyhow."

Her granddaughter, Callie, came out on the porch to see what was wrong with Lina. "Granny," she said, "I wouldn't talk lak dat. Missy will think you is dat way all de time."

"Git back to your ironin', gal," said Lina. "I knows I talks right smart ugly. Didn't my Miss Fannie, tell me one time she was gwine to put potash in my mouth to clean it out? Now, Nigger, I said git, 'fore I hits you." Her grandmother started toward her, and Callie lost no time going inside the house. Lina went back to her chair, and as she sat down started singing. With each note her tones grew louder. The words were something like this:

"God A'mighty, when my heart begins to burn
And dat old wheel begins to turn,
Den, Oh, Lord! Don't leave me here."
[Pg 266]

It seemed from the length of her chant that the wheels would turn indefinitely, but no sooner had she finished that song, than she started another.

"When my old mammy died a-shoutin',
All de friend I had done died and gone.
She died a-prayin', she died a-prayin'.

"In dat day dat you died, dat you died,
Gwine to be a star risin' in dat mornin'.
Didn't you hear 'em say, 'gwine to be a
Star risin' in de mornin'.

"De Christians all will know in dat day,
Dat my old mammy died a-shoutin', died a-shoutin',
'Cause dat star sho gwine to be dar.

"Oh, Lord! Don't leave me now, Oh, Lord!
But guide me all 'long de way, 'long de way.
'Cause I'se in trouble, dat I am.
Lord! Oh, Lord! don't leave me now."

"Honey, I jus' feels lak prayin' and cussin' too, at de same time, but it's 'cause I'se so happy. Here I is, I'se nigh 'bout crazy. If Old Marster could jus' come back I'd sho have plenty of evvy thing I needs.

"I 'members dem old frolics us had, when harvest times was over, and all dat corn was piled up ready for de big cornshuckin'. Honey, us sho had big old times. Us would cook for three or four days gittin' ready for de feast dat was to follow de cornshuckin'. De fust thing dey done was 'lect a general to lead off de singin' and keep it goin' so de faster dey sung, de faster[Pg 267] dey shucked de corn. Evvy now and den dey passed de corn liquor 'round, and dat holped 'em to wuk faster, and evvy Nigger dat found a red ear got a extra swig of liquor. Atter de sun went down dey wuked right on by de light of pine torches and bonfires. Dem old pine knots would burn for a long time and throw a fine bright light. Honey, it was one grand sight out dar at night wid dat old harvest moon a-shinin', fires a-burnin', and dem old torches lit up. I kin jus' see it all now, and hear dem songs us sung. Dem was such happy times. When all de corn was shucked and dey had done et all dat big supper, dey danced for de rest of de night.

"Dey had logrollin's when dere was new ground to be cleared up. De menfolks done most of dat wuk, but de 'omans jus' come along to fix de big supper and have a good time laughin' and talkin' whilst de menfolks was doin' de wuk. Atter de logs was all rolled, dey et, and drunk, and danced 'til dey fell out. I'll bet you ain't never seed nothin' lak dem old break-downs and dragouts us had dem nights atter logrollin's. Dey sho drug heaps of dem Niggers out.

"When de harvest moon was 'most as bright as daylight us had cotton pickin's. Dem big crowds of slaves would clean out a field in jus' no time, and you could hear 'em singin' a long ways off whilst dey was a-pickin' dat cotton. Dey 'most allus had barbecue wid all de[Pg 268] fixin's to enjoy when dey finished pickin' out de cotton, and den lots of drinkin' and dancin'. 'Bout dat dancin', Honey, I could sho cut dem corners. Dancin' is one thing I more'n did lak to do, and I wish I could hear dat old dance song again. Miss Liza Jane, it was, and some of de words went lak dis, 'Steal 'round dem corners, Miss Liza Jane. Don't slight none, Miss Liza Jane. Swing your partner, Miss Liza Jane.' Dere was heaps and lots more of it, but it jus' won't come to me now.

"One night not long atter day sot us free, dere was a big old Nigger breakdown on our plantation, and such a lot of Niggers as you never seed was at dat dance. Whilst us was havin' de bestest time, takin' a drink 'twixt dances, us heared a 'oman screamin' lak

murder. Evvybody run, but us jus' heard a horse runnin' and dat 'oman still hollerin'. De menfolks got on horses and rid all night but dey never did find 'em. One of our gals was gone; a real young one named Rose Billups. Some damn, no 'count Nigger had done stole 'er. Us didn't larn nothin' 'bout her for nigh onto a year, den she writ to Marse Jack to come atter her. He went. It was a fur way off, and I don't 'member now whar it was. Dat mean man had done most kilt Rose, and had left her wid a baby. No, mam, dey didn't never cotch 'im.

"Norman Green had two wives and dey didn't live fur from our plantation. I knows 'bout dat, 'cause in[Pg 269] years to come I lived on de same farm whar dey was. It was dis way: his fust wife, Tildy, was sold off from him in slavery time. He got married again, and atter freedom come Tildy come right back to him. He kept both his wives right dar in de same one-room cabin. Deir beds sot right 'side each other. One wife's chilluns was all boys and de other didn't have nothin' but gals.

"Yes, Chile, us wuked hard. I'se seed my mammy plowin' in de fields many a time, wid her skirt pinned up to keep it out of de dirt. Yes, mam, us did wuk, but us had a good place to stay, plenty somepin t'eat, and plenty clothes to wear; dere warn't nothin' else us needed.

"Missy did you ever hear dat old sayin' 'bout folks gittin' speckledy when dey gits old? Well, 'cordin' to dat old sayin', I'se sho been here a mighty long time. Jus' look at my legs." She raised her skirts to her knees to display the white specks that stood out in clear contrast on her dark skin. "Dat's a sho sign of bein' old folks," insisted Lina.

She stood up and peered down the road, impatient for the return of the children, who were to bring her tobacco and coffee. Finally she saw them come over the hill and could hardly restrain herself until they arrived in the yard. Snatching the parcels, as the children came up the steps, Lina called out,[Pg 270] "Callie, come here, gal, fix my pipe quick, and put dat coffeepot on de fire bucket, 'cause Glory to God! I'se gwine to smoke my old pipe and drink me one more good cup of coffee."

When Callie finally succeeded in filling and lighting Lina's pipe to suit her, and the old woman had inhaled with an exaggerated air of satisfaction for several moments, she indulged in a few more shouts of "Praise de Lord!" then she said, "Honey, I'se ready to talk some more now. Damned if I ain't gwine to git right on talkin' for you, 'fore I starts off singin' again.

"Oh, it's 'bout my marriage you wants to know now, is it? Well, me and Jeff Hunter got married up whilst I was still stayin' on Marster Jack's place. Jeff went to de courthouse and got us a license lak de white folks, and us had a nice weddin'. My dress was mighty pretty; it was white lawn, made long waisted lak dey wore dresses den. Mrs. Lizzie Johnson made it, and it had long sleeves, and a long full skirt wid lots of ruffles. De two petticoats she gimme to wear wid my weddin' dress was ruffled to beat de band and had

trimmin' on evvy ruffle. My weddin' drawers even had ruffles on 'em; I was really dressed up. Us had a big fine supper and two dances. Sho, mam, dat ain't no mistake. Us did have two dances, one was at home, and den us went[Pg 271] over to my brother's house whar he give us another one and served cake and wine to de weddin' party. Atter us drunk dat wine, it warn't no trouble to dance for de rest of de night.

"Me and Jeff moved on de Johnson place, and Jeff wuked some for Mrs. Johnson's daughter, Mrs. Fannie Dean, but for de most part he wuked in de wagon shop wid Mr. Tom Anthony.

"I'se still got one of my old weddin' petticoats; I wore out four bodies on it." Lina excused herself and went inside the house for a moment. She returned to the porch with an old-fashioned suitcase or "grip," as she called it. "Dis here's older dan old Lina is," she said. "It belonged to Miss Lizzie's daddy, but I sewed it back together atter dey throwed it away, and I'se gwine to keep it long as I lives." She opened it and took out a petticoat that was yellow with age. It was several yards wide and was encircled by numerous embroidered ruffles. The skirt was sewed on to a tight, straight body-waist that was much newer than the skirt and this waist was topped by a rose-colored crocheted yoke. "Mrs. Fannie Dean made dat for me," declared Lina. "Look at dis old black shawl. See how big it is? Dat's what I used to wear for a wrop on church days 'fore I ever had a coat.[Pg 272]

"I'se still sleepin' on one of Miss Lizzie's beds. Come inside, I wants you to see it." A part of the tall headboard had been removed so the bed could be used in a low-ceiled room. The footboard was low, and Lina insisted on showing the small double locks that joined the side pieces to the head and foot boards. These are rarely seen now. She was using the original old wooden-framed wire fabric springs, and a straw mattress. As she displayed the latter, she said, "Yes, Chile, I still sleeps on my straw tick, 'cause dat's what I was raised on and dere ain't nothin' sleeps as good as dat old tick when it's full of good fresh wheat straw."

Lina's coffeepot on the charcoal bucket was steaming and the visitor prepared to depart so that the old woman could enjoy her drink while it was fresh and hot. Lina followed her to the veranda and said with much enthusiasm, "God bless you, Lady. You sho is done made me happy, and I'se gwine to pray for you evvy day and ask de Lord to take keer of you all de time. I'se gwine to do dat, 'cause I wants you to come back and let me sing some more of our good old songs for you sometime." After the house was no longer in sight, Lina's high pitched voice could be heard singing My Old Mammy Died a-Shoutin'.