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Excerpt from John J. Audubon's *Ornithological Biography (1827–1839)*, where he encounters a runaway slave while hunting in a Louisiana bayou

John J. Audubon, best known for his extraordinary contributions to the study of birds, was himself a mulatto.

NEVER shall I forget the impression made on my mind by the *rencontre* which forms the subject of this article, and I even doubt if the relation of it will not excite in the mind of my reader emotions of varied character.

Late in the afternoon of one of those sultry days which render the atmosphere of the Louisiana swamps pregnant with baneful effluvia, I directed my course towards my distant home, laden with a pack consisting of five or six Wood Ibises, and a heavy gun, the weight of which even in those days when my natural powers were unimpaired, prevented me from moving with much speed. Reaching the banks of a miry bayou, only a few yards in breadth, but of which I could not ascertain the depth, on account of the muddiness of its waters, I thought it might be dangerous to wade through it with my burden; for which reason, throwing to the opposite side each of my heavy birds in succession, together with my gun, powder-flask, and shot-bag, and drawing my hunting-knife from its scabbard, to defend myself, if need should be, against alligators, I entered the water, followed by my faithful dog. As I advanced carefully and slowly, "Plato" swam around me, enjoying the refreshing influence of the liquid element that cooled his fatigued and heated frame. The water deepened, as did the mire of its bed; but with a stroke or two I gained the shore.

Scarcely had I stood erect on the opposite bank, when my dog ran to me, exhibiting marks of terror, his eyes seeming ready to burst from their sockets, and his mouth grinning with the expression of hatred, while his feelings found vent in a stifled growl. Thinking that all this was produced by the scent of a wolf or bear, I stopped to take up my gun, when a stentorial voice commanded me to stand still, or die!" Such a "qui vive" in these woods was as unexpected as it was rare. I instantly raised and cocked my gun; and although I did not yet perceive the individual who had thus issued so peremptory a mandate, I felt determined to combat with him for the free passage of the grounds. Presently a tall firmly-built Negro emerged from the bushy underwood, where, until that moment, he must have been crouched, and in a louder voice repeated his injunction. Had I pressed a trigger, his life would have instantly terminated; but observing that the gun, which he aimed at my breast, was a wretched rusty piece, from which fire could not readily be produced, I felt little fear, and therefore did not judge it necessary to proceed at once to extremities. I laid my gun at my side, tapped my dog quietly, and asked the man what he wanted.

My forbearance, and the stranger's long habit of submission, produced the most powerful effect on his mind "Master," said he, "I am a runaway. I might perhaps shoot you down;

but God forbids it, for I feel just now, as if I saw him ready to pass his judgment against me for such a foul deed, and I ask mercy at your hands. For God's sake, do not kill me, master!" And why, answered I, have you left your quarters, where certainly you must have fared better than in these unwholesome swamps? "Master, my story is a short, but a sorrowful one. My camp is close by, and as I know you cannot reach home this night, if you will follow me there, depend upon my honour you shall be safe until the morning, when I will carry your birds, if you choose, to the great road."

The large intelligent eyes of the Negro, the complacency of his manner, and the tones of his voice, I thought, invited me to venture; and as I felt that I was at least his equal, while, moreover, I had my dog to second me, I answered that I would follow him. He observed the emphasis laid on the words, the meaning of which he seemed to understand so thoroughly, that, turning to me, he said, "There, master, take my butcher's knife, while I throw away the flint and priming from my gun!" Reader, I felt confounded: this was too much for me; I refused the knife, and told him to keep his piece ready, in case we might accidentally meet a cougar or a bear.

Generosity exists everywhere. The greatest monarch acknowledges its impulse, and all around him, from his lowliest menial to the proud nobles that encircle his throne, at times experience that overpowering sentiment. I offered to shake hands with the runaway. "Master," said he, "I beg you thanks," and with this he gave me a squeeze, that alike impressed me with the goodness of his heart, and his great physical strength. From that moment we proceeded through the woods together. My dog smelt at him several times, but as he heard me speak in my usual tone of voice, he soon left us, and rambled around as long as my whistle was unused. As we proceeded, I observed that he was guiding me towards the setting of the sun, and quite contrary to my homeward course. I remarked this to him, when he with the greatest simplicity replied, "merely for our security."

After trudging along for some distance, and crossing several bayous, at all of which he threw his gun and knife to the opposite bank, and stood still until I had got over, we came to the borders of an immense cane brake, from which I had, on former occasions, driven and killed several deer. We entered, as I had frequently done before, now erect, then on "all fours." He regularly led the way, divided here and there the tangled stalks, and, whenever we reached a fallen tree, assisted me in getting over it with all possible care. I saw that he was a perfect Indian in the knowledge of the woods, for he kept a direct course as precisely as any "Red-skin" I ever travelled with. All of a sudden he emitted a loud shriek, not unlike that of an owl, which so surprised me, that I once more instantly levelled my gun.

"No harm, master, I only give notice to my wife and children that I am coming." A tremulous answer of the same nature gently echoed through the tree-tops. The runaway's lips separated with an expression of gentleness and delight, when his beautiful set of ivory teeth seemed to smile through the dusk of evening that was thickening around us. "Master," said he, "my wife, though black, is as beautiful to me as the President's wife is to him; she is my queen, and I look on our young ones as so many princes – but you shall see them all, for here they are, thank God!"

There, in the heart of the cane-brake, I found a regular camp. A small fire was lighted, and on its embers lay broiling some large slices of venison. A lad nine or ten years old was blowing the ashes from some fine sweet potatoes. Various articles of household furniture were carefully disposed around, and a large pallet of bear and deer skins seemed to be the resting-place of the whole family.

The wife raised not her eyes towards mine, and the little ones, three in -number, retired into a corner, like so many discomfited raccoons: but the Runaway, bold and apparently happy, spoke to them in such cheering words, that at once one and all seemed to regard me, as one sent by Providence to relieve them from all their troubles. My clothes were hung up by them to dry, and the Negro asked if he might clean and grease my gun, which I permitted him to do, while the wife threw a large piece of deer's flesh to my dog, which the children were already caressing.

Only think of my situation, reader! Here I was, ten miles at least from home, and four or five from the nearest plantation, in the camp of runaway slaves, and quite at their mercy. My eyes involuntarily followed their motions, but as I thought I perceived in them a strong desire to make me their confidant and friend, I gradually relinquished all suspicion. The venison and potatoes looked quite tempting, and by this time I was in a condition to relish much less savoury fare; so, on being humbly asked to divide the viands before us, I partook of as hearty a meal as I had ever in my life.

Supper over, the fire was completely extinguished, and a small lighted pine-knot placed in a hollowed calabash. Seeing that both the husband and wife were desirous of communicating something to me, I at once and fearlessly desired them to unburden their minds; when the Runaway told me a tale of which the following is the substance.

About eighteen months before, a planter residing not very far off, having met with some losses, was obliged to expose his slaves at a public sale. The value of his negroes was well known, and on the appointed day, the auctioneer laid them out in small lots, or offered them singly, in the manner which he judged most advantageous to their owner. The Runaway, who was well known as being the most valuable next to his wife, was put up by himself for sale, and brought an immoderate price. For his wife, who came next, and alone, eight hundred dollars were bidden and paid down. Then the children were exposed, and, on account of their breed, brought high prices. The rest of the slaves went off at rates corresponding to their qualifications.

The Runaway chanced to be purchased by the overseer of the plantation; the wife was bought by an individual residing about a hundred miles off, and the children went to different places along the river. The heart of the husband and father failed him under this dire calamity. For awhile he pined in deep sorrow under his new master; but having marked down in his memory the names of the different persons who had purchased each dear portion of his family, he feigned illness, if indeed he whose affections had been so grievously blasted could be said to feign it, refrained from food for several days, and was

little regarded by the over-seer, who felt himself disappointed in what he had considered a bargain.

On a stormy night, when the elements raged with all the fury of a hurricane, the poor Negro made his escape, and, being well acquainted with all the neighboring swamps, at once made directly for the cane brake, in the centre of which I found his camp. A few nights afterwards he gained the abode of his wife, and the very next after their meeting he led her away. The children one after another he succeeded in stealing, until at last the whole objects of his love were under his care.

To provide for five individuals was no easy task in those wilds, which, after the first notice was given of the wonderful disappearance of this extraordinary family, were daily ransacked by armed planters. Necessity, it is said, will bring the wolf from the forest. The Runaway seems to have well understood the maxim, 'for under night he approached his first master's plantation, where he had ever been treated with the greatest kindness. The house servants knew him too well not to aid him to the best of their power, and at the approach of each morning he returned to his camp with an ample supply of provisions. One day, while in search of wild fruits, he found a bear dead before the muzzle of a gun that had been set for the purpose. Both articles he carried to his home. His friends at the plantation managed to supply him with some ammunition, and in damp and cloudy days he first ventured to hunt around his camp. Possessed of courage and activity, he gradually became more careless, and rambled farther in search of game. It was an one of his excursions that I met him, and he assured me that the noise which I made in passing the bayou had caused him to lose the chance of killing a fine deer, although, said he, "my old musket misses fire sadly too often."

The runaways, after disclosing their secret to me, both rose from their seat, with eyes full of tears. "Good master, for God's sake, do something for us and our children," they sobbed forth with one accord. Their little ones lay sound asleep in the fearlessness of their innocence. Who could have heard such a tale without emotion? I promised them my most cordial assistance. They both sat up that night to watch my repose, and I slept close to their urchins, as if on a bed of the softest down.

Day broke so fair, so pure, and so gladdening, that I told them such heavenly appearances were ominous of good, and that I scarcely doubted of obtaining their full pardon. I desired them to take their children with them, and promised to accompany them to the plantation of their first master. They gladly obeyed. My Ibises were hung around their camp, and, as a memento of my having been there, I notched several trees, after which I bade adieu, perhaps for the last time, to that cane brake. We soon reached the plantation, the owner of which, with whom I was well acquainted, received me with all the generous kindness of a Louisiana planter. Ere an hour had elapsed, the Runaway and his family were looked upon as his own. He afterwards re-purchased them from their owners, and treated them with his former kindness; so that they were rendered as happy as slaves generally are in that country, and continued to cherish that attachment to each other which had led to their adventures. Since this event happened, it has, I have been informed, become illegal to separate slave families without their consent.