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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK OLD JABE'S MARITAL EXPERIMENTS ***

OLD JABE'S MARITAL EXPERIMENTS

By Thomas Nelson Page

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Old Jabe belonged to the Meriwethers, a fact which he never forgot or allowed anyone else to forget; and on this he traded as a capital, which paid him many dividends of one kind or another, among them being a dividend in wives. How many wives he had had no one knew; and Jabe's own account was incredible. It would have eclipsed Henry VIII and Bluebeard. But making all due allowance for his arithmetic, he must have run these worthies a close second. He had not been a specially good "hand" before the war, and was generally on unfriendly terms with the overseers. They used to say that he was a "slick-tongued loafer," and "the laziest nigger on the place." But Jabe declared, in defiance, that he had been on the plantation before any overseer ever put his foot there, and he would outstay the last one of them all, which, indeed, proved to be true. The overseers disappeared with the end of Slavery, but Jabe remained "slick-tongued," oily, and humorous, as before.

When, at the close of the war, the other negroes moved away, Jabez, after a brief outing, "took up" a few acres on the far edge of the plantation, several miles from the house, and settled down to spend the rest of his days, on what he called his "place," in such ease as constant application to his old mistress for aid and a frequently renewed supply of wives could give.

Jabe's idea of emancipation was somewhat one-sided. He had all the privileges of a freed-man, but lost none of a slave. He was free, but his master's condition remained unchanged: he still had to support him, when Jabez chose to call on him, and Jabez chose to call often.

"Ef I don' come to you, who is I got to go to!" he demanded.

This was admitted to be a valid argument, and Jabez lived, if not on the fat of the land, at least on the fat of his former mistress's kitchen, with such aid as his current wife could furnish.

He had had several wives before the war, and was reputed to be none too good to them, a fact which was known at home only on hearsay; for he always took his wives from plantations at a distance from his home.

The overseers said that he did this so that he could get off to go to his "wife's house," and thus shirk work;

the other servants said it was because the women did not know him so well as those at home, and he could leave them when he chose.

Jabez assigned a different reason:

"It don' do to have your wife live too nigh to you; she 'll want t' know too much about you, an' you can't never git away from her"—a bit of philosophy the soundness of which must be left to married men.

However it was, his reputation did not interfere with his ability to procure a new wife as often as occasion arose. With Jabez the supply was ever equal to the demand.

Mrs. Meriwether, his old mistress, was just telling me of him one day in reply to a question of mine as to what had become of him; for I had known him before the war.

"Oh! he is living still, and he bids fair to outlast the whole colored female sex. He is a perfect Bluebeard. He has had I do not know how many wives and I heard that his last wife was sick. They sent for my son, Douglas, the doctor, not long ago to see her. However, I hope she is better as he has not been sent for again."

At this moment, by a coincidence, the name of Jabez was brought in by a maid.

"Unc' Jabez, m'm."

That was all; but the tone and the manner of the maid told that Jabez was a person of note with the messenger; every movement and glance were self-conscious.

"That old—! He is a nuisance! What does he want now? Is his wife worse, or is he after a new one?"

"I d' n' kn', m'm," said the maid, sheepishly, twisting her body and looking away, to appear unconcerned. "Would n' tell me. He ain' after *me*!"

"Well, tell him to go to the kitchen till I send for him. Or—wait: if his wife 's gone, he 'll be courting the cook if I send him to the kitchen. And I don't want to lose her just now. Tell him to come to the door."

"Yes, 'm." The maid gave a half-suppressed giggle, which almost became an explosion as she said something to herself and closed the door. It sounded like, "Dressed up might'ly—settin' up to de cook now, I b'lieve."

There was a slow, heavy step without, and a knock at the back door; and on a call from his mistress, Jabez entered, bowing low, very pompous and serious. He was a curious mixture of assurance and conciliation, as he stood there, hat in hand. He was tall and black and bald, with white side-whiskers cut very short, and a rim of white wool around his head. He was dressed in an old black coat, and held in his hand an ancient beaver hat around which was a piece of rusty crape.

"Well, Jabez?" said his mistress, after the salutations were over, "How are you getting along!"

"Well, mist'is, not very well, not at all well, ma'am. Had mighty bad luck. 'Bout my wife," he added, explanatorily. He pulled down his lips, and looked the picture of solemnity.

I saw from Mrs. Meriwether's mystified look that she did not know what he considered "bad luck." She could not tell from his reference whether his wife was better or worse.

"Is she—ah? What—oh—how is Amanda?" she demanded finally, to solve the mystery.

"Mandy! Lord! 'm, 'Mandy was two back. She 's de one runned away wid Tom Halleck, an' lef' me. I don't know how *she* is. I never went ahter her. I wuz re-ally glad to git shet o' her. She was too expansive. Dat ooman want two frocks a year. When dese women begin to dress up so much, a man got to look out. Dee ain't always dressin' fer *you*!"

"Indeed!" But Mrs. Meriwether's irony was lost on Jabez.

"Yes, 'm; dat she did! Dis one 's name was Sairey." He folded his hands and waited, the picture of repose and contentment.

"Oh, yes. So; true. I 'd forgotten that 'Mandy left you. But I thought the new one was named Susan!" observed Mrs. Meriwether.

"No, 'm; not de *newes* one. Susan—I had her las' Christmas; but she would n' stay wid me. She was al'ays runnin' off to town; an' you know a man don' want a ooman on wheels. Ef de Lawd had intended a ooman to have wheels, he 'd 'a' gi'n 'em to her, would n' he?"

"Well, I suppose he would," assented Mrs. Meriwether. "And this one is Sarah? Well, how is—?"

"Yes, 'm; dis one was Sairey." We just caught the past tense.

"You get them so quickly, you see, you can't expect one to remember them," said Mrs. Meriwether, frigidly. She meant to impress Jabez; but Jabez remained serene.

"Yes, 'm; dat 's so," said he, cheerfully. "I kin hardly remember 'em myself."

"No, I suppose not." His mistress grew severe. "Well, how 's Sarah?"

"Well, m'm, I could n' exactly say—Sairey she 's done lef me—yes, 'm." He looked so cheerful that his mistress said with asperity:

"Left you! She has run off, too! You must have treated her badly?"

"No, 'm. I did n'. I never had a wife I treated better. I let her had all she could eat; an' when she was sick —"

"I heard she was sick. I heard you sent for the doctor."

"Yes, 'm; dat I did—dat 's what I was gwine to tell you. I had a doctor to see her *twice*. I had two separate and *indifferent* physicians: fust Dr. Overall, an' den Marse Douglas. I could n' do no mo' 'n dat, now, could I?"

"Well, I don't know," observed Mrs. Meriwether. "My son told me a week ago that she was sick. Did she get well?"

The old man shook his head solemnly.

"No, 'm; but she went mighty easy. Marse Douglas he eased her off. He is the bes' doctor I ever see to let 'em die easy."

Mingled with her horror at his cold-blooded recital, a smile flickered about Mrs. Meriwether's mouth at this

shot at her son, the doctor; but the old man looked absolutely innocent.

"Why did n 't you send for the doctor again?" she demanded.

"Well, m'm, I gin her two chances. I think dat was 'nough. I wuz right fond o' Sairey; but I declar' I 'd rather lost Sairey than to *broke*."

"You would!" Mrs. Meriwether sat up and began to bristle. "Well, at least, you have the expense of her funeral; and I 'm glad of it," she asserted with severity.

"Dat 's what I come over t' see you 'bout. I 'm gwine to give Sairey a fine fun'ral. I want you to let yo' cook cook me a cake an'—one or two more little things."

"Very well," said Mrs. Meriwether, relenting somewhat; "I will tell her to do so. I will tell her to make you a good cake. When do you want it?"

"Thank you m'm. Yes, m'm; ef you 'll gi' me a right good-sized cake—an'—a loaf or two of flour-bread—an'—a ham, I 'll be very much obleeged to you. I heah she 's a mighty good cook?"

"She is," said Mrs. Meriwether; "the best I 've had in a long time." She had not caught the tone of interrogation in his voice, nor seen the shrewd look in his face, as I had done. Jabez appeared well satisfied.

"I 'm mighty glad to heah you give her sech a good character; I heahed you 'd do it. I don' know her very well."

Mrs. Meriwether looked up quickly enough to catch his glance this time.

"Jabez—I know nothing about her character," she began coldly. "I know she has a vile temper; but she is an excellent cook, and so long as she is not impudent to me, that is all I want to know."

Jabez bowed approvingly.

"Yes, 'm; dat 's right. Dat 's all I want t' know. I don' keer nothin' 'bout de temper; atter I git 'em, I kin manage 'em. I jist want t' know 'bout de char-àcter, dat 's all. I did n' know her so well, an' I thought I 'd ax you. I tolt her ef you 'd give her a good char-àcter, she might suit me; but I 'd wait fer de cake—*an'* de ham."

His mistress rose to her feet.

"Jabez, do you mean that you have spoken to that woman already!"

"Well, yes, 'm; but not to say *speak* to her. I jes kind o' mentioned it to her as I 'd inquire as to her char-àcter."

"And your wife has been gone—how long! Two days!"

"Well, mist'is, she 's gone fer good, ain't she!" demanded Jabez. "She can't be no mo' gone!"

"You are a wicked, hardened old sinner!" declared the old lady, vehemently.

"Nor, I ain't, mist'is; I clar' I ain't," protested Jabez, with unruffled front.

"You treat your wives dreadfully."

"Nor, I don't, mist'is. You ax 'em ef I does. Ef I did, dee would n' be so many of 'em anxious t' git me. Now, would dee? I can start in an' beat a' one o' dese young bloods aroin' heah, now." He spoke with pride.

"I believe that is so, and I cannot understand it. And before one of them is in her grave you are courting another. It is horrid—an old—Methuselah like you." She paused to take breath, and Jabez availed himself of the pause.

"Dat 's de reason I got t' do things in a kind o' hurry—I ain' no Methuselum. I got no time t' wait."

"Jabez," said Mrs. Meriwether, seriously, "tell me how you manage to fool all these women."

The old man pondered for a moment.

"Well, I declar,' mist'is, I hardly knows how. Dee wants to be fooled. I think it is becuz dee wants t' see what de urrs marry me fer, an' what dee done lef' me. Woman is mighty curi-some folk."

I have often wondered since if this was really the reason.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK OLD JABE'S MARITAL EXPERIMENTS ***

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