

Selection from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845)

In this selection, Frederick Douglass describes his battle with a "Negro-breaker."

If at any one time of my life more than any another, I was to drink the bitterest dregs of slavery, that time was during the first six months of my stay with Mr. Covey. We were worked in all weathers. It was never too hot or too cold. It could never rain, blow, hail or snow too hard for us to be in the field.... The longest days were too short for him, and the shortest nights too long for him...Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the desire to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; behold a man transformed into a brute.....

You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man...Long before daybreak I was called to go and rub, curry and feed the horses. I obeyed. And was glad to obey. But whilst thus engaged in the act of throwing some blades from the loft, Covey entered the stable with a long rope; and just as I was half way out of the loft, he caught hold of my legs and went about tying me. And soon as I found out what he was up to, I gave a sudden spring, and as I did so, he holding to my legs brought me sprawling on the stable floor. Mr. Covey seemed to think he had me, and could do what he pleased, but for a moment - - from whence came the spirit, I do not know - - I resolved to fight; and suiting my action to the resolution I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose up. He held on to me and I to him. My resistance was so entirely unexpected, that Covey seemed taken all aback. He trembled like a leaf. This gave me assurance and I held him uneasy causing the blood to run where I touched him.... Mr. Covey soon called out to Hughes for help. Hughes came and while Covey held me, attempted to tie my right hand. While he was in the act of doing so, I watched my chance and gave him a heavy kick close under the ribs. The kick fairly sickened Hughes, so that he left me in the hay with Mr. Covey. This kick had the effect of not only weakening Hughes, but Covey also. While he saw Hughes bending over with pain, his courage. He asked me if I meant to persist in my resistance. I told him I did, come what might. I told him that he had used me like a brute for six months, and that I was determined to be used no longer. With that he strove to drag me to a stick that was lying just outside the stable door. He meant to knock me down. But just as he went over to get the stick, I seized him with both hands by his collar, and brought him by a sudden snatch to the ground. By this time, Bill came. Covey called upon him for assistance. Bill wanted to know what he could do. Covey said, "Take hold of him, take hold of him!" Bill said his master hired him to work, and not to help to whip me; so he left Covey and me to fight our own battle out. We were at it for nearly two hours. Covey sat length let me go, puffing and blowing at a great rate, saying that if I had not resisted, he would not have whipped me half as much. The truth was, that he had not whipped me at all; I considered him as getting entirely the worst end of the bargain; for he had drawn no blood from me but I

had from him. The whole six months afterwards that I spent with Mr. Covey, he never laid the weight of his fist upon me in anger. He would occasionally say he did not want to get hold of me again. "No," thought I, " you need not or you will come off worse than you did before."

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my life as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self confidence and inspired me with a determination to be free.... and now I resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form; the time had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact....