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Slave Life in Virginia and Kentucky: A Narrative by Francis Fedric, Escaped Slave (Library of Southern Civilization)

C. L. Innes

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In 1854, faced with the threat of yet another brutal beating, a fifty-year-old slave in Mason County, Kentucky, decided to try again to escape. His first attempt had ended in his near starvation as he hid for nine weeks in a swamp, before hunger compelled him to return to his master. This time the slave sought the help of a neighbor with abolitionist sympathies, and he joined the hundreds of other fugitive slaves fleeing across the Ohio River and north to Canada on the Underground Railroad. After his arrival in Toronto he discarded his master's surname (Parker), renamed himself Francis Fedric, and married an Englishwoman. In 1857, he traveled with his wife to Great Britain, where he lectured on behalf of the antislavery cause and published two versions of his life story. Born in Virginia circa 1805, Francis Fedric was not unlike thousands of other African Americans who escaped slavery in the southern states and sought refuge in Britain. Many of his fellow ex-slaves also joined the abolitionist lecture circuit and published memoirs to support both the cause and themselves. Addressed to a British audience, these memoirs constitute a distinctive subgenre of the slave narrative, and an essential continuation of the narrative tradition established in England by Olaudah Equiano, Ottobah Cugoano, and Mary Prince. The first of Fedric's two memoirs, Life and Sufferings of Francis Fedric, While in Slavery: An Escaped Slave after 51 Years in Bondage (1859), offers a brief but vivid and dramatic twelve-page description of his escape. Slave Life in Virginia and Kentucky; or, Fifty Years of Slavery in the Southern States of America (1863) provides a much more detailed account of life as a slave and of plantation culture in the southern states. Together the two works present a mesmerizing and distinct perspective on slavery in the South. Amazingly, the two narratives, among the most interesting of the genre, remained out of print for nearly a hundred and fifty years. Collected here for the first time and meticulously edited by C. L. Innes, Slave Life in Virginia and Kentucky: A Narrative By Francis Fedric, Escaped Slave includes a contextual introduction, substantial biographical information on Fedric, and extensive annotations to help situate and illuminate his narratives. Long forgotten and never before published in the United States, Fedric's narratives are certain to take their rightful place alongside the most recognizable accounts in the canon of slave memoirs.

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