

“CHRISTMAS DAYS IN OLD VIRGINIA” · 1907

country, away from their mothers for six or twelve months; they were permitted to come home at Christmas.

It was made known during these holidays which slaves were to remain on the home plantation, which ones were to be hired out to the neighboring farmers, and which, if any, were to be sold. It was an important period to the slaves in many different ways, but the feelings of joy at the reunion of the family prevailed above all others.

There were a number of festivities which led up to Christmas and prepared for it. One of them was the corn-shucking. No one who has not actually experienced an old-fashioned corn-shucking in Virginia can understand exactly what I mean. These corn-shucking bees, or whatever they may be called, took place during the last of November, or the first half of December. As I have said, they were a prelude to the festivities of the Christmas season. Usually they were held upon one of the larger and wealthier plantations in the neighborhood. After all of the corn had been gathered, thousands of bushels sometimes, it would be piled up in the shape of a mound, often to the height of fifty or sixty feet. Invitations would be sent around by the master himself to the neighboring planters, inviting their slaves on a certain night to attend the corn-shucking. In response to these invitations as many as one or two hundred men, women and children would come together.

When all were assembled around the pile of corn, some one individual, who had already gained a reputation as a leader in singing, would climb on top of the mound and begin at once, in clear, loud tones, a solo — a song of the corn-shucking season — a kind of singing which I am sorry to say has very largely passed from memory and practice. After leading off in this way, in clear, distinct tones, the chorus at the base of the mound would join in, some hundred voices strong. The words, which were largely improvised, were very simple and suited to the occasion, and more often than not they had the flavor of the camp-meeting rather than any more secular proceeding. Such singing I have never heard on any other occasion. There was something wild and weird about that music, such as will never again be heard in America.

While the singing was going on, hundreds of hands were busily engaged in shucking corn. The corn-shucking and the music would continue, perhaps, until ten o'clock at night. The music made the work light and pleasant. In a very short time, almost before any one realized it, hundreds of bushels of corn had been shucked. About that