



0. Platt Meets Bass - Story Preface
1. Slave Pens in Washington
2. Platt's Journey to Slavery in Louisiana
3. Life as a Louisiana Slave
4. Life as the Slave of John Tibbeats
5. Life as a Slave of Edwin Epps
6. The Beating of Patsey, the Slave
- 7. Platt Meets Bass**
8. Bass Helps Platt (Solomon Northup)
9. A Plan for Freedom
10. Solomon Northup Goes Home
11. Not-Guilty Verdicts at Trial

In this still shot from *12 Years a Slave*, we see Solomon Northup (known as "Platt" and portrayed by Chiwetel Ejiofor) with Samuel Bass (a Canadian carpenter played by Brad Pitt). Working on the Epps plantation, Bass tells Epps that American slavery is wrong. He agrees to write letters for "Platt," alerting the captive's friends in the North about his enslavement in the Bayou Boeuf area of Louisiana. Still-shot from the film, copyright Fox Searchlight, all rights reserved. Image online via Fox Searchlight. Click on it for a better view.

When life on the Epps plantation seemed to be at its lowest point, something encouraging happened for Solomon. In June of 1852, he met a man called Samuel Bass who was helping to build a new home for the Epps family.

A Canadian, who had found construction work in the American South, Bass helped-out at the Epps plantation. Because Solomon had some building experience, from his work with Tibbeats, he was ordered to help build the home (instead of work the fields).

Bass did not approve of slave-owning. As he worked on the building project, Solomon heard an interesting exchange between Epps and Bass:

"I tell you what it is Epps," said Bass, "it's all wrong—all wrong, sir—there's no justice nor righteousness in it ... this question of Slavery; what right have you to your n ___ when you come down to the point?"

"What right!" said Epps, laughing; "why, I bought 'em, and paid for 'em."

Of course you did; the law says you have the right to hold a n ___, but begging the law's pardon, it lies. Yes, Epps, when the law says that it's a liar, and the truth is not in it. Is every thing right because the law allows it? Suppose they'd pass a law taking away your liberty and making you a slave?"

"Oh, that ain't a supposable case," said Epps, still laughing; "hope you don't compare me to a n ___, Bass."

"Well," Bass answered gravely, "no, not exactly. But I have seen n ___ before now as good as I am, and I have no acquaintance with any white man in these parts that I consider a whit better than myself. Now, in the sight of God, what is the difference, Epps, between a white man and a black one?"

"All the difference in the world," replied Epps. "You might as well ask what the difference is between a white man and a baboon. Now, I've seen one of them critters in Orleans that knowed just as much as any n ___ I've got. You'd call them feller citizens, I s'pose?"—and Epps indulged in a loud laugh at his own wit.

"Look here, Epps," continued his companion; "you can't laugh me down in that way. Some men are witty, and some ain't so witty as they think they are. Now let me ask you a question. Are all men created free and equal as the Declaration of Independence holds they are?"

"Yes," responded Epps, "but all men, n ___, and monkeys ain't;" and hereupon he broke forth into a more boisterous laugh than before.

"There are monkeys among white people as well as black, when you come to that," coolly remarked Bass. "I know some white men that use arguments no sensible monkey would. But let that pass.

These n ___ are human beings. If they don't know as much as their masters, whose fault is it? They are not allowed to know anything. You have books and papers, and can go where you please, and gather intelligence in a thousand ways. But your slaves have no privileges. You'd whip one of them if caught reading a book. They are held in bondage, generation after generation, deprived of mental improvement, and who can expect them to possess much knowledge?

If they are not brought down to a level with the brute creation, you slaveholders will never be blamed for it. If they are baboons, or stand no higher in the scale of intelligence than such animals, you and men like you will have to answer for it.

There's a sin, a fearful sin, resting on this nation, that will not go unpunished forever. There will be a reckoning yet—yes, Epps, there's a day coming that will burn as an oven. It may be sooner or it may be later, but it's a coming as sure as the Lord is just."

"If you lived up among the Yankees in New-England," said Epps, "I expect you'd be one of them cursed fanatics that know more than the constitution, and go about peddling clocks and coaxing n ___ to run away."

"If I was in New-England," returned Bass, "I would be just what I am here. I would say that Slavery was an iniquity, and ought to be abolished. I would say there was no reason nor justice in the law, or the constitution that allows one man to hold another man in bondage.

It would be hard for you to lose your property, to be sure, but it wouldn't be half as hard as it would be to lose your liberty. You have no more right to your freedom, in exact justice, than Uncle Abram yonder. Talk about black skin, and black blood; why, how many slaves are there on this bayou as white as either of us? And what difference is there in the color of the soul? Pshaw! the whole system is as absurd as it is cruel. You may own n ___ and behanged, but I wouldn't own one for the best plantation in Louisiana."

"You like to hear yourself talk, Bass, better than any man I know of. You would argue that black was white, or white black, if any body would contradict you. Nothing suits you in this world, and I don't believe you will be satisfied with the next, if you should have your choice in them." (12 Years a Slave, pages 266-8 of an online version of Northup's book.)

Epps could not convince Bass that he was wrong. And THAT was a very good thing because, in Bass, Solomon found an ally (and a possible way out of his wrongful captivity as a slave).

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Platt-Meets-Bass-12-Years-a-Slave>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Platt-Meets-Bass-12-Years-a-Slave>

Questions 2 Ponder

Did the U.S. Constitution Ever Permit Inhumane Treatment of Slaves?

In *12 Years a Slave*, Edwin Epps refers to American law when he tells Bass (a white man who opposes slavery) that he doesn't know "more than the constitution."

Is Epps right that, at the time, the U.S. Constitution allowed slaves to be treated in numerous inhumane ways? Explain your answer.

What can be done if the highest law in a country, which is upheld by the highest court in the country, condones immoral treatment of human beings?

What Did Whites Who Opposed Slavery Risk by Speaking Out?

In *12 Years a Slave*, a white man named Bass who is sympathetic to Solomon Northup's plight, is Canadian. Do you think that fact has anything to do with his views on slavery?

Bass is very vocal about his opposition to slavery and the unequal treatment of blacks and whites. Did he risk anything by so openly stating his opinions? If so, what did he risk?

What do you think made slavery acceptable during its many years of existence in America? If more whites had vocally opposed slavery, during that time, do you think it would have ended sooner?

Do you think it is easier today for people to "speak up" about bad things than it was in the 18th and 19th centuries? Why, or why not?

Why Prevent Slaves from Learning to Read and Write?

In *12 Years a Slave* we learn, from Bass, that most slaves were not allowed to read and write. Why was that so?

Media Stream



Platt Meets Bass

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