

A freedom tree in freedom square

by Robert C.-H Shell

A circular raised dais near Church Square in Bureau Street Cape Town, almost next to the slave lodge, marks the spot where imported and local slaves were auctioned under a fir tree. Perhaps as many as 100,000 human beings were sold and resold from this point. Yet unless one trips over the circular concrete marker, one is quite unaware of this spot. One has to stand above the marker to read it. Much, much more should be made of this historical site. The old slave tree used to stand on this spot. We have one artist's impression of this tree in 1830 from a SA boundpamphlet entitled *The Tourist*. Peter Coates of the National Library has found excellent photographic evidence of where the tree stood (see *infra*). A fragment of the tree is in the Slave Lodge museum.

Cannot the old slave tree be replaced with a graft from the world's most famous freedom tree? When the Condor Legion bombed the town of Guernica in Catalonia in 1937, one of the the only organic things left was Guernica's famous "freedom tree"—immortalized in William Wordsworth's 1810 poem written after Napoleon's peninsula wars:

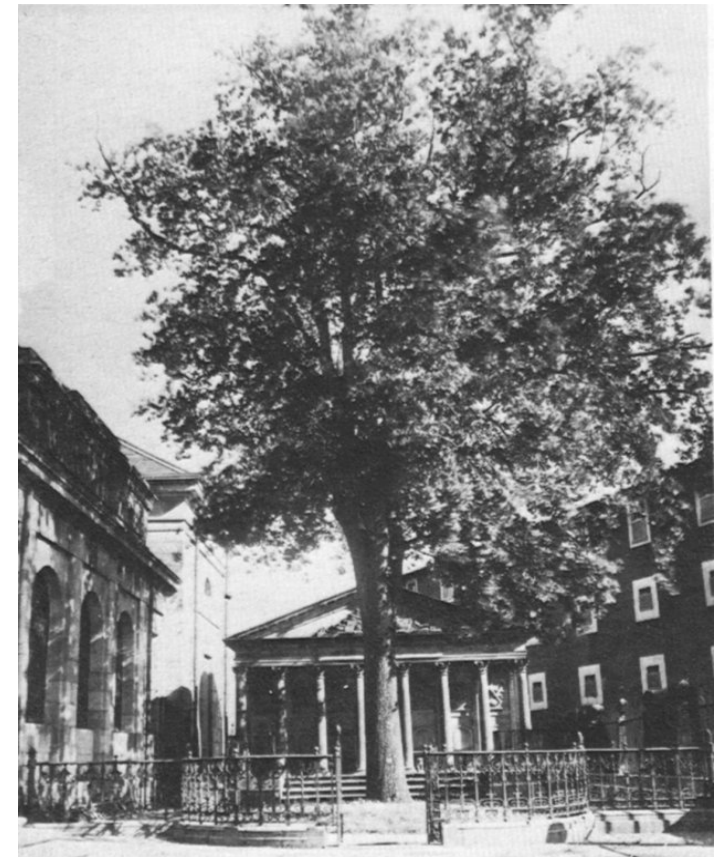
"The oak of Guernica"

(Supposed address to the same)

OAK of Guernica! Tree of holier power
 Than that which in Dodona did enshrine
 (So faith too fondly deemed) a voice divine
 Heard from the depths of its aerial bower—
 How canst thou flourish at this blighting hour?
 What hope, what joy can sunshine bring to thee,
 Or the soft breezes from the Atlantic sea,
 The dews of morn, or April's tender shower?



Picasso's Guernica



Guernica's famous "freedom tree"



Stroke merciful and welcome would that be
 Which should extend thy branches on the ground, 10
 If never more within their shady round
 Those lofty-minded Lawgivers shall meet,
 Peasant and lord, in their appointed seat,
 Guardians of Biscay's ancient liberty.

1810.

The tree was also immortalised in Picasso's painting of Guernica in 1937 although he painted over most of it, leaving only a symbolic fragment in the middle of the painting.

The present author suggested to Richard van der Ross, when he was the former SA ambassador to Spain, that he acquire a slip of this tree to transplant on the spot of the old slave tree. The transplanting exercise would be a relatively inexpensive but a poignant and symbolic way of raising the consciousness about Cape slavery. The "December the First movement" organizers have indicated they might arrange this event. Dr Ross has indicated that the townspeople of Guernica are keen to co-operate.

What follows is a description of an auction drama which must have been common under the old slave tree.



SALE OF SLAVES AT THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE.

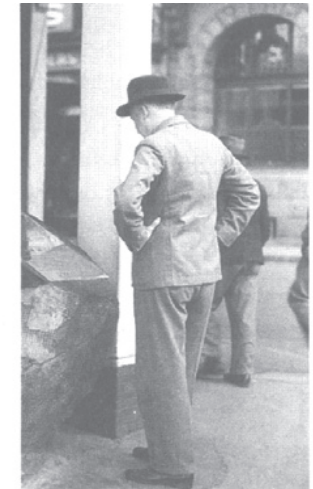
The Tourist

In abridging the following description of a slave-sale, from an able article lately written on this subject by a cordial friend to our cause, it is necessary to explain that the person here designated by the name of Humanitas is a gentleman of high benevolent character and literary celebrity, who, on leaving Cape Town to visit a friend in the interior, consented to become the bearer of three thousand rix dollars to a clergyman resident at a town through which he was obliged to pass. It was in the course of this journey that he witnessed the scene which is described in the following narrative:--

“A considerable number of persons had already assembled, and not a few of those whose countenances would have led the powerfully descriptive Shakespeare to have denounced them ‘villains.’ They were those whose whole contour seemed an index to their hearts, hard-formed, ill-favoured, and tanned to semi-blackness. The outragers of the laws of nature -- the bold defiers of God ! bearing human forms, but in whose breasts flowed not a drop of human kindness -- whose names and deeds will live in endless execration -- whose calling all good men abhor, and which, by God’s providence, will, ere long, be blotted from our world as one of the foulest stains which mars the beauty of the Almighty’s moral and intellectual kingdom -- they were **slave dealers!**”

“A variety of articles were exposed for sale, over which Humanitas cast a careless eye; for, as they were composed chiefly of household requisites and implements of husbandry, there was not any thing in them calculated to engage his attention. Scarcely, however, had he finished his vacant survey of the above varieties, before his eye was arrested by another portion of property, ranged in a line with the horned cattle which flanked the enclosure, the whole of which was to be disposed of by the fall of the hammer. This was a group of unfortunate beings whose forefathers had been stolen from the land of their birth, and these their hapless progeny were, therefore, adjudged worthy to be branded by the opprobrious name, and treated with the barbarity, of slaves and beasts of burden.

“The spirit of Humanitas groaned within him, and his whole soul rose in indignation at the cruelty of his fellows, as he surveyed the



The old fir tree, Church Square. A plaque on its stump read ‘To commemorate the old fir tree (of which this is all that remains) This plate has been affixed by A. Hilliard. The old tree was a most historic landmark dating from the days of Van Riebeeck (by whom it was probably planted) and was the original Slave Tree, beneath which slaves were bought & sold. They were brought from the Old Supreme Court Buildings opposite (then the Slave Depot) & placed on tables under this tree for exhibition & sale. Slavery was finally abolished in 1838, and the slave tree, owing to its great age, was removed by the City Council on 9th November 1916 having weathered the storms of more than 250 years and so it passed – honourably’.



sable group; for once he blushed to think he was a man, or that, as being such, he was classed with the unlawful retainers of his fellow-men in bondage. He viewed, through the medium of his own feelings, the unjust and inhuman system, a brief exhibition of which he now surveyed; and, while contemplating in his mind the fearful result which will, in all probability, at some future day, proceed from the explosion of so nefarious a system, he mentally deplored the present degraded state of society which such a scene but too powerfully witnessed.

“The deep feeling of his mind had thrown him into a state of absence so perfect as to have rendered him altogether indifferent to the things and persons by whom he was surrounded. From this abstraction he was roused by the plaintive and heart-rending moans of a female; he turned, almost mechanically, and beheld an interesting young woman of colour, standing apart from her companions in captivity, the intensity of whose grief might be better conceived of by the agony which shook her frame, then expressed by the cold language of narration. Close by her side stood another female, whose dress bespoke her of respectable connexions, but her countenance wore not the reprobatory hue (as some men seem to think a tawny skin is) possessed by the others, and yet her sorrow was not less intense than her’s whose complexion had made her a slave. In her arms she held a sweet infant, which at intervals she pressed to her bosom in convulsive agony, as she gazed with phrenzied emotion on the black for whom her tears flowed so profusely. The scene was, in all its parts, a painfully interesting and novel one. Humanitas felt it so; and, prompted by a strong desire to ascertain, if possible, the cause of so powerful a sympathy on the part of a white person, so unusual, even in the female breast, in the brutalizing regions of slavery, towards a slave, he enquired of some who were connected with the sale for a solution of the mystery.

“A few words informed the inquirer that the white person was the daughter of the late farmer, whose effects were not to be disposed of, and that the slave over whom she so affectionately wept was her foster-sister. From infancy they had been associates -- in childhood they were undivided. The



distinction which colour made in the eyes of some, to them was not known. The marriage of the farmer's daughter was the first cause of separation they had every known, and even then a pain such as sisters only feel at parting was felt by each of them as they said -- Farewell! She had retired with her husband to a distant part of the colony, and there received the mournful intelligence of her father's death, and the account of the public sale of his property; included in this, she was certain, would be found the slave in question: her father's insolvent circumstances rendered this unavoidable. With an affection which distance, fatigue, and danger could not affect, she had travelled four hundred miles, cheered by the hope of being able to purchase her freedom.

“The pleasing delusion which strengthened and encouraged her, during the fatigue and her toilsome journey, fled as she reached the spot where already her beloved foster-sister stood exposed for sale. Here she received the afflictive information that several regular traffickers in human beings were present, who were able and disposed to purchase her at a price much above what she was able to raise. Among this number was one from an adjacent town, who was fully acquainted with her worth, and who had declared his intention to possess her, although a sum should be set upon her head doubling the usual price of an ordinary slave.

“The voice of female sorrow is powerfully eloquent, and is ever sufficient to move the heart with pity and commiseration, excepting the hearts of villains and cowards. Humanitas felt it deeply now; but the unfeeling bands by whom he was surrounded experienced it not; no muscle of the hard evil-faced slave-dealers was moved; innumerable scenes of a similar description had calcined every vestige of humanity, and left nothing in their sordid breasts but the brutal or satanic avarice which their trade had begotten.

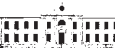
“While Humanitas was making his inquiries, receiving an answer, and commenting on the distressing circumstances, the sale was going on; a number of articles had been disposed of, and then a slave was brought



forward. The rapacious individuals before referred to pressed round her, and, with a degree of cruelty and indelicacy which could only be displayed by such besotted and beastly-minded creatures, commenced their examination of her person, treating every bone and muscle, of a being which bore the image of the great Creator, as if a beast of burden had stood before them: she was soon disposed of; and then the slave to whom reference has been made already was brought out, and, after undergoing the same mode of scrutiny, was put up for sale.

“I will not attempt a description of the maiden glow of shame and modest indignation which passed over her fine open countenance, and lit up her large keen eye, as the treatment of the merciless dealers was forced upon her, nor the crushing agony which evidently wrung her soul, as she gazed, half-frantically, on her foster-sister, while the cruel jest and little-minded laugh curled the lips of those by whom she was surrounded. Oh ! no, no! -- attempt here would indeed be idleness, if not profanity; the feeling heart can better conceive of it than the most eloquent and ready pen can find language to describe it.

“The sale proceeded with unusual spirit until it had reached the sum of two thousand six dollars. There was evidently a strong feeling of rivalry among the dealers concerning the slave for which they were bidding. Having, however, reached the sum stated, they flagged gradually, the contest evidently subsiding; now after another ceased to bid, and, at length, two only maintained the strife. One was the agent of a clergyman’s lady, who, it was known, would treat her well; the other, the dealer, who had fully made up his mind to possess her for the purpose of letting her out as an animal of labour. Two thousand five hundred dollars was the last bid, and a pause ensued; the dealer was now the highest bidder; expectation was on the tip-toe; all eyes were turned towards the auctioneer, and “any advance?” was asked in an audible voice. Silence continued, and the question was repeated -- when the attention of the company was directed from the auction by the appearance of three figures who were seen descending the side of a mountain in the distance. It appeared as if



they were hastening to the sale, and, the lot which was now up being an important one, the seller felt something like obligation to suspend the fall of the hammer until they reached the spot. The persons were soon discovered to be a gentleman on horseback, accompanied by two Hottentot servants on foot.

“A few minutes only elapsed, during which the auctioneer sipped some lemonade, to assist him the better to support his future garrulity, when the stranger rode up. A large military cloak enveloped his whole person, so as entirely to cut off all possibility of ascertaining who he might be. He almost immediately dismounted, and, giving his horse to one of his servants, surveyed the things around him with perfect indifference. The sale went on -- another bidding was made by the agent -- the dealer followed -- the agent bid again, when, as if at once to close the protracted affair, the dealer shouted, ‘Three thousand rix dollars.’ This ended the struggle -- the agent retired. ‘Once, twice,’ responded he who held the hammer -- ‘is there no advance?’ He cast his eyes round the assembly with the inquisitiveness of his calling -- neither wink, nod, or voice, gave answer to his question. A dead pause ensued -- it was fearful, but short. The hand of the auctioneer was again raised -- when the poor slave, in a tone of sublimated agony, shrieked out, ‘Jesus, help me!’ and, clasping her hands wildly, fell senseless on the ground.

The shriek of the unfortunate thrilled through the ear of the stranger, and entered his soul; and, while some simple measure was employed to restore her to animation, he looked round, as if seeing information concerning what he had heard and saw. His gaze caught the eye of Humanitas, who instantly recognized in him an old friend. A brief but graphic explanation was immediately furnished; and, as the slave again returned to consciousness, the voice of the stranger was heard -- ‘Three thousand one hundred dollars.’ ‘One hundred more,’ shouted the dealer. ‘Another hundred,’ said the stranger. A look which would, had it been possible, have annihilated his person, was given by the dealer, as he vociferated, ‘Fifty more.’ ‘Another fifty,’ continued the stranger. ‘Fifty more,’



shouted the dealer. 'One hundred more,' echoed the stranger; 'she is mine' he added with spirited firmness, 'at any price.' The pulse of the mortified and enraged trafficker in human beings might have almost been heard as the unwelcome sounds saluted him. He had, however, proceeded as far as he dared, and therefore answered not the repeated call of the auction man. 'One, two, three,' at proper intervals, was repeated; and, at length, the hammer fell, the stranger being the purchaser at the sum of Three thousand four hundred and fifty rix dollars. The business, although nearly terminated, was not yet closed. Payment was to be made, and immediate payment was demanded. The gentleman offered his checque on the bank at Cape Town; but the auctioneer, who experienced a degree of vexation at the disappointment which his friend (the dealer) had met with, determined to throw every possible obstacle in the way to prevent the bargain, and therefore refused the checque. The stranger looked perplexed, and argued the validity of the payment; but the hammer-man was inexorable.

"Humanitas marked the conduct of the man carefully, and, as he did so, he felt those pleasing emotions (for the existence of them he could not account), which the purchase of the slave by his friend had created, suddenly subsiding. At this moment, his thoughts rested on the sum of which he was the bearer to the clergyman, and, aware it could be replaced in a day or two, he presented the gentleman with it. Three thousand he produced from his pocket, and, in silver, they made up to the amount of fifty more between them; -- still the sum was not complete, and this modern Shylock demanded the whole, or its equivalent. The stranger hesitated a moment, and then drew forth a handsome gold watch and appendages, and, throwing the whole on the table, concluded the purchase.

"Still ignorant of her future fate, but as if happy to have escaped from the power of the slave-dealer, the weeping, trembling creature rushed forward, and fell at the feet of her purchaser. A scene followed which baffles all description: -- angels, in their messages of mercy to the sons of men, might have been arrested in their flight, to notice and applaud it; but the



act received the approving smile of Him who is the God of angels. The stranger bended over the prostrate female, and, having raised her from the earth, took her hand and led her to her foster-sister, whose agony was still intense, to whom he presented her, saying, 'Receive your friend, no longer as a slave, but as your companion; and, in your daily supplications at the throne of grace, forget not to implore a blessing on the head of Major M-----.'"¹

¹* The stranger was an officer in the East India Company's service. He had come to the Cape for his health; and, while shooting on the mountains, was attracted by the crowd in the valley, and providentially arrived in time to perform the noble action, than which none is more imposing in the compass of history.



