

“. . . you fought for the single dream of a
man unchained
And God's great chariot rolling.”

STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT,
John Brown's Body

1.

The Quarter

CHESAPEAKE BAY forms the western boundary of the section of Maryland which is sometimes called Tidewater Maryland, sometimes called the Eastern Shore. Here there are so many coves and creeks, rivers and small streams, that the land areas are little more than heads or necks of land, almost surrounded by water.

In these streams the ebb and flow of the tide is visible for miles inland—hence the name Tidewater Maryland.

In 1820, much of the Eastern Shore was heavily wooded. The streams were filled with fish. Game birds—wild duck and snipe—abounded in all of the coves and marshes. It could truly be said that every plantation thereabout “at its garden gate, has an oyster-bed, a fishing-bar, and a ducking blind.”

The plantation that belonged to Edward Brodas, in Dorchester County, was typical of this section of Mary-

land, for one of its land boundaries was a river—the Big Buckwater River. It was more or less isolated. The nearest village, Bucktown, was little more than a settlement composed of post office, church, crossroads store, and eight or ten dwelling houses.

There was an air of leisure about the planter's life here. Fishing and hunting were an integral part of it, just as it had been part of the life of the Indians, who had practically disappeared from the Eastern Shore by 1750.

The house in which Edward Brodas lived was very large. There had to be room for his friends, his relatives, as well as his family. Visitors came from long distances, and so usually stayed a month or two before undertaking the journey back home. There were extra rooms for travelers, who carried the proper letters of introduction, because inns and taverns offered uncertain lodging for the night.

Edward Brodas was known as the Master to his Negro slaves. His house, which the slaves called the Big House, stood near a country road. The kitchen was a small detached building in the rear, known as the cookhouse. Not too far away from the Big House were the stables, where the riding horses and the carriage horses, the grooms and the hostlers were housed. Close to the stables

were the kitchen gardens and the cutting gardens. Beyond these lay the orchards and the barns for the work horses and cows and mules.

The Big House, the cookhouse, the stables, formed a complete unit. Beyond this lay the fields, the clear cultivated land bordered by the forest.

Out of sight of the Big House, but not quite out of hearing, was the "quarter" where the slaves lived.

The quarter consisted of a group of one-room, windowless cabins. They were built of logs that had been cut from the nearby forests. The chinks were filled with mud. These roughhewn logs were filled with sap, and as they dried out, the wood contracting and expanding with changes in temperature, the roofs sagged, the walls buckled. The narrow clay-daubed chimneys leaned as though some unseen pressure were forcing them over. Seen from a distance, these sway-backed cabins seemed to huddle together as though for protection. The fact that they were exactly alike, that they were surrounded by the same barren hard-packed earth, furthered the illusion.

The cabins were exactly alike inside, too. There was a crude fireplace with one or two black iron pots standing in front of it. The hearth was merely a continuation of the dirt floor. When the wind blew hard, smoke came

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down the chimney, into the room, in puffs, so that the walls were smoke-darkened. Even in summer there was a characteristic smoky smell in the cabins.

The fireplace not only provided heat in winter, it was the source of light, and it was used for cooking. Piles of old worn-out blankets served as beds. There were no chairs; so the occupants of the cabins either squatted in front of the fire or sat on the floor. In the middle of the dirt floor there was a large, fairly deep hole covered over with loose boards. This was the potato hole, where sweet potatoes were stored in winter to protect them from the frost.

Harriet Greene, who was usually called Old Rit, and her husband, Benjamin Ross, both slaves, lived in one of these windowless cabins, in the quarter, on the Brodas plantation. They had several children, some of whom still lived with them. The older children were "hired out" by the master, Edward Brodas, to farmers who needed slave labor but who could not afford to buy slaves.

In 1820, Old Rit had another baby. There was no record made of the date of the birth of this child, because neither Old Rit nor her husband, Ben, could read or write.

Like most people who live close to the land, and who have neither clock nor calendar, they measured time by

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the sun, dividing it roughly into sunup, sunhigh, sundown. The year was not divided by months but by the seasons. It was separated into Seedtime, Cotton Blossomtime, Harvest, Christmas. One year was distinguished from another by its happenings, its big, memorable occurrences—the year of the big storm, the year of the early frost, or the long drought, the year the old master died, the year the young master was born.

Old Rit and Ben decided that they would call this new baby Araminta, a name that would be ultimately shortened to Minta or Minty. This would be her basket name or pet name, and would be used until she grew older. Then they would call her Harriet. That year would be separated from the others by referring to it as "the year Minty was born."

News, good or bad, traveled swiftly through the quarter. All the slaves knew that Old Rit had another baby. That night they left their own cabins, moving like shadows, pausing now and then to listen, always expecting to hear the sound of hoofbeats, loud and furious, along the road, a sound that meant the patrollers were hunting another runaway. Only they added an extra syllable to the word, making it "patteroller." Then, moving quietly, quickly, they slipped inside Ben's cabin, to look at the new baby.

They arrived in groups, two or three at a time, and

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stood looking down at the baby. It was a girl. They already knew that, but they asked whether it was a boy or a girl out of politeness; and asked what her name would be, though they knew that, too.

Girls were not worth much, and Old Rit already had a passel of children, but they did not say this. They suggested tactfully that Old Rit had better see to it that this new girl baby was trained as a cook or a weaver or a seamstress. Perhaps she could take care of children, be a child's nurse. That way she would never become a common field hand.

They admired the baby, briefly. They asked after the mother's health, and then lingered on, squatting down in front of the open fire, talking. The talk around the fire was about the new overseer, about the corn crop, about the weather, but it ended with the subject of freedom—just as it always did.

The bold ones, young, strong, said freedom lay to the North, and one could obtain it if one could but get there. A hush fell over the cabin, an uneasiness entered the room. It seemed to reach the sleeping children, huddled on the old blankets in the corner, for they stirred in their sleep.

They were all silent for a moment, remembering the ragged, half-starved runaways that they had seen brought back in chains, branded with an R, or the ears cropped,

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remembering how they had seen them whipped and sent South with the chain gang.

Then another of the slaves, squatted by the fire, broke the silence. He used a long word: manumission. It was a word the master used. It was a promise that had been made to all of them. If they were faithful and hard-working, the master would set them free, manumit them, when he died.

Someone pointed out that such things did and could happen. There were free Negroes living in their own cabins on the edge of the woods, not far away from the plantation. Because these people were free, their children were born free. This was said with a covert glance at the tiny new baby, Minta or Minty, who lay close by Old Rit's side, in a corner of the cabin.

One of the sad dispirited slaves said that freedom lay only in death.

The bold ones said this was not true. They said you could run away, get to the North and be free. Slaves were disappearing all the time from the nearby farms and plantations. True, some of them were caught, brought back and sold South, but many of them were not. Quite often the masters and the overseers came back without the runaways. They said they had sold them. But this was not necessarily true. Surely some of them, some of those young prime field hands, glossy skinned,

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supple-jointed, surely some of those strong young men must have reached the North.

Yes, the others said, but how could one know? How be certain? Why did none of them ever come back? Why were they never seen again? It was cold in the North. Perhaps they died on the way, died of cold and hunger. Who could possibly know?

Then uncertainty and uneasiness filled the cabin again. More and more slaves were disappearing. Edward Brodas, the master, was selling them off. Each time the trader came to Maryland, came to Cambridge, the master sold another group of slaves. Nowadays it seemed as though he were raising slaves just to sell them. Breeding them, just like the farmers bred cows or sheep.

They were doing the same thing on the other plantations in Dorchester County—the Stewart plantation, and the Ross plantation—they were all selling slaves. Things were not going well with the masters. They needed money. The Georgia trader paid high prices, and if the masters were in debt, or a crop had failed, or they had been gambling heavily and losing, they sold off another lot of slaves.

When the slaves learned that they were to be sold, they ran away. They always knew when the decision had been reached to sell them. They were afraid of the living death that awaited them in the rice fields, on the

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great cotton plantations, the sugar plantations, in the deep South—and so ran away.

To the slaves those words, sold South, sold down the river, carried the sound of doom. The master used it as a threat to recalcitrant slaves. The runaways that were caught and brought back were immediately sold South, as a punishment for running away.

Thus the action on both sides was like a circle that went around and around, never ending. The master kept selling slaves because he needed money. The slaves, learning that they were about to be sold, would run away. The number of runaways from Maryland kept increasing. Especially from this Eastern Shore where the rivers and coves offered a direct route to the North, where the Choptank River curved and twisted in a northeasterly course, the whole length of the state—all the way to Delaware.

That night in the quarter, one of the bold young slaves said if one could get hold of a boat, and there were boats everywhere—rowboats, gunning skiffs, punts, because almost every plantation was near a cove or a creek or an inlet—one could get away.

This whispering about freedom, about runaways, about manumission, went on every night, in windowless slave cabins all over the South. Slaves everywhere knew what happened in Washington, Boston, New York,

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Norfolk, Baltimore, if it dealt with the subject of slavery. They knew it sometimes before the masters heard about it.

The close communication, the rapid exchange of information among the slaves, troubled and disturbed the masters. They said, half in joke, half seriously, that news seemed to travel down the wind, or else that it pulsed along from plantation to plantation, traveling over the tangle of grapevines and honeysuckle that grew in the woods.

On the plantation of Edward Brodas, the slaves knew when the Georgia trader arrived in Cambridge, the nearest city, and rented a room in the tavern. They knew it before Brodas knew it. The trader sent out printed notices of his arrival. Though most of the slaves could not read, there were a few who could, and they told the others what it said on the trader's handbills: "Will pay top prices for prime field hands. . . ."

On the night that Harriet (who would be known as Araminta, or Minty, or Minta) Ross was born, those words on the handbills were ever present in the minds of the slaves gathered in Old Rit's cabin. Before they said good night, they looked at the baby again. Someone said quietly, "Best thing to do is make sure she works in the Big House, sew or cook or weave—maybe be a nurse."

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Old Rit drew the baby closer to her side, thinking, field hand, hot sun and long rows of cotton and the overseer's whip. Minty would *never* be a field hand if she had anything to do with it.

Then the slaves slipped out of the cabin as quietly as they had entered it, one at a time, bare feet making no sound at all on the hard smooth ground outside.

In that same year, 1820, the year of the Missouri Compromise, Thomas Garrett and his wife, Sarah, both Quakers, moved from Darby, Pennsylvania, to Wilmington, Delaware. Both of these people would, years later, know and admire Harriet Ross, though they would know her by a different name.

That year, John Brown, who was twenty years old, married the Widow Lusk, a short, plain-looking woman. He was in the tanning business in Hudson, Ohio, at the time of his marriage. Years later, he, too, would know and admire Harriet Ross.

2.

The First Years

LIKE ALL the other babies in the quarter, Harriet Ross cut her first teeth on a piece of pork rind. The rind was tied to a string, and the string hung around her neck.

She learned to walk on the hard-packed earth outside the cabin, getting up, falling down, getting up again—a small naked creature, who answered to the name of Minta or Minty.

When she finally mastered the skill of walking, she began playing with other small children. All of the little ones, too young to run errands, were placed under the care of a woman, so old she could no longer work. She was a fierce-looking old woman, head wrapped in a white bandanna which she called a head rag. She sat crouched over, on the doorstep of her cabin, sucking on an empty clay pipe.

Though she was very old, she could still switch a small child with vigor, using a tough young shoot from

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a black gum tree, to enforce obedience. She never let the children out of her sight, warning them of the creek where they might drown, cautioning them about the nearby woods where they might get lost, shooing them out of the cabins lest they burn themselves in the hot ashes in the fireplaces. The children were afraid of her. She was toothless and she mumbled when she talked. The skin on her face was creased by a thousand wrinkles.

When she was in good humor, she told them stories about what she called the Middle Passage. The mumbling old voice evoked the clank of chains, the horror of thirst, the black smell of death, below deck in the hold of a slave ship. The children were too young to understand the meaning of the stories and yet they were frightened, standing motionless, listening to her, and shivering even if the sun was hot.

The mothers of these children worked in the fields. A few of them, like Old Rit, worked in or around the Big House.

Because the mothers were not at home, a family rarely ate together, all at the same time. The grownups ate from the skillet or black iron pot in which the food was cooked. Some of them ate from tin plates, balanced on the knees, eating for the most part with their hands.

The children were fed in a haphazard fashion, a bit of corn bread here, a scrap of pork there; occasionally

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they received a cup of milk, sometimes potatoes. When they were given corn-meal mush, it was poured into a large tray or trough. In winter the trough was placed on the floor of the cookhouse. In summer it was put outdoors, on the ground. The small children came running from all directions, with oyster shells, or pieces of shingle, to scoop up the mush. They swarmed around the trough of mush like so many small pigs.

Harriet, like the rest of the children, learned quickly that he who ate the fastest, got the most food. Yet they were always a little hungry, not starving, but with an emptiness inside them that was never quite assuaged.

She learned other things, too. On winter days, when the sun shone, she played on the south side of the cabin, where it was warmer. On cold rainy days, she huddled in a corner of the big chimney in the cookhouse, watching the constant stirring of the big iron pots. In the summer, when the sun was blistering hot, she stayed on the north side of the cabin because it was cooler there.

When Harriet was two years old, the whispering about freedom increased. In the quarter, at night, some of the slaves gathered together in the cabin that belonged to Ben, her father, and talked. It could hardly be called talking, it was conversation carried on under the breath, so that it was almost no sound at all.

On the way to Ben's cabin the slaves moved so quietly, so slowly, so stealthily, that they might have been part

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of the night itself. As they edged through the quarter, there was not even the soft sound of a bare foot on the hard-packed earth, not even the sound of breathing, not a cough, or a sneeze, nothing to indicate that a slave had left his own cabin and was paying a visit to another cabin.

There was fear and uneasiness all over the South that year. Fear on both sides. The masters were afraid of the slaves. The slaves were afraid of the masters.

Yet the slaves had to talk about this new and dreadful thing that had happened. Word of it seemed to have been carried by the wind, pushed along over the grapevines, from Charleston, South Carolina, to Wilmington, Delaware, and on down the Eastern Shore of Maryland, down to Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana. It was discussed all through the South, in the slave cabins, in the big houses, whispered about, argued about, at night, just as it was in Ben's cabin.

They whispered about a man named Denmark Vesey. At first they had only bits of information about him, scraps of the story, and they slowly pieced it together, until they knew as much about him as the men who had tried and executed him.

Denmark Vesey was a free Negro. He bought his freedom when he was thirty-three. He had been a sailor. He could read and write. He was always reading the Bible. He told and retold the story of the children of Israel, and how they escaped from bondage, to a group

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of slaves who were his followers. He told them that all men were born equal. He said that it was degrading for a colored man to bow to a white man. Finally, he planned an insurrection, in which he and his followers were to kill all the white people in Charleston, South Carolina, and free the slaves. Before the insurrection was to take place, he quoted from the Book of Zechariah in the Old Testament: "Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, and thy spoil shall be divided in the midst of thee. For I will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle; and the city shall be taken."

He had two men who worked closely with him, who helped him make the homemade pikes that were used in the insurrection. These men were Peter Poyas and Mingo Harth. They kept lists of the names of Denmark's followers, of the places where ammunition was kept, places where there were horses, and the names of slaves who looked after horses.

Two days before this uprising was to take place, the plot was revealed. One hundred thirty-one slaves, in and around Charleston, were arrested. Denmark and thirty-four others were hanged. None of them confessed. The story went that Peter Poyas said, "Die silent," when one of the slave conspirators appeared to be weakening under torture.

In the quarter, at night, when they talked of Denmark they said he had made life harder for the rest of them.

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They shivered even as they said it. It was no longer safe to walk along the roads at night, no longer safe to walk about the plantation where they lived, at night.

There were new laws now, because of Denmark. The new laws took away what little freedom of movement they had had. A slave caught on the road, alone, without a pass, would be whipped. Not by the overseer, or the master, but by any white man who happened to see him.

They were not supposed to talk to each other either. Two slaves standing talking would be whipped. They might be plotting servile insurrection, those long hard words that meant death to the master, death to the slave, too.

They had to be careful which songs they sang. They could no longer sing that fiery song, sound of thunder in the chorus:

*Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go!*

Night after night they slipped into each other's cabins and talked of the man Denmark Vesey, of freedom, of the children of Israel and how they were led out of bondage. Inevitably, someone repeated the verse from Zechariah that Denmark had quoted: "Behold, the day

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of the Lord cometh . . . and the city shall be taken.”

Then someone else voiced an objection. Things were infinitely worse because of Denmark and all his plots and plans for freedom. They could not hold church meetings of their own any more. It was now a crime to teach a slave to read or to write. The masters said that even a little learning made a slave discontented, unfit for a life of slavery.

Old Rit did not like all this talk of freedom and of Denmark Vesey. She said that the master had promised to free her and Ben and the children when he died. There was the sound of hope in her voice, mixed with fear. Because the master might forget to write it down in his will. Even if he did write it down, some of the crops might turn out bad, or he might have extra heavy debts to pay, or there might be a new overseer who would not like her or Ben—any of these things would mean that she and Ben would be sold, the children sold too, all of them scattered over the countryside.

Like the rest of the slaves, she feared change. She liked this place where they lived. The older children worked on nearby farms, so they were still together, as a family. True, the cabin was hot in summer, and filled with cold drafts in the winter, and the smoke from the fireplace half blinded them, but it was still a good place—it was their home.

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The summers were warm, and there were creeks and inlets and streams in the nearby woods where they could catch fish, surreptitiously, of course, because they weren't supposed to. Sometimes they even fished in the Big Buckwater River, or set traps in the woods, and thus caught rabbits or squirrels and added a little variety to their food. After all, anyone would get tired of eating the same ashcake and fat back, or herring, day after day.

The master thought well of her and of Ben. Ben was big, broad-shouldered, a valuable hand. He worked in the woods, felling trees. She sometimes teased him about his ax. He was as fond of it as though it were a person. He said it was just right, it fitted his hands, almost worked by itself.

Ben was such a good workman, the master had placed him in charge of the slaves who cut the timber. Ben sometimes went all the way to the Bay (the Chesapeake) where the big logs were loaded on boats and sent to the shipbuilders in Baltimore.

Ever since the slaves started all this talk about Denmark Vesey, she had been uneasy, insecure. She worried about the children. They would never be really hers until they were free. Yet freedom was a dangerous thing to even think about. She wished the slaves would stop whispering about it all the time.

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But every night, before these whispered conversations came to an end, one of the bolder slaves spoke of Denmark Vesey, voice pitched low, not much more than a murmuring in the firelit cabin. He talked about the slave who protested when Denmark had said that all men were equal. The slave had said, "But we are slaves." Denmark Vesey had said, "You deserve to be."

Old Rit hated the silence that always fell over the cabin afterward—a hush that spread and spread, and the shadows on the walls seemed to deepen. It made her heart beat faster, made her catch her breath.

In that same year, 1822, when Harriet was two years old, a twelve-year-old boy living in Lexington, Massachusetts, bought his first book, a Latin dictionary, with his own money. He earned the money by picking whortleberries (huckleberries) in his father's pasture, and selling them in Boston.

The boy's name was Theodore Parker. The Latin dictionary was the first of thirteen thousand volumes which he would eventually buy and, at his death, bequeath to the Boston Public Library.

Years later, Theodore Parker incurred the wrath of the pro-slavery forces in the country. He was called "the mad parson"; and he, too, eventually came to know Harriet Ross, but he knew her as Harriet Tubman.

Six Years Old

BY THE TIME Harriet Ross was six years old, she had unconsciously absorbed many kinds of knowledge, almost with the air she breathed. She could not, for example, have said how or at what moment she learned that she was a slave.

She knew that her brothers and sisters, her father and mother, and all the other people who lived in the quarter, men, women and children, were slaves.

She had been taught to say, "Yes, Missus," "No, Missus," to white women, "Yes, Mas'r," "No, Mas'r," to white men. Or, "Yes, sah," "No, sah."

At the same time, someone had taught her where to look for the North Star, the star that stayed constant, not rising in the east and setting in the west as the other stars appeared to do; and told her that anyone walking toward the North could use that star as a guide.

She knew about fear, too. Sometimes at night, or

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during the day, she heard the furious galloping of horses, not just one horse, several horses, thud of the hoofbeats along the road, jingle of harness. She saw the grown folks freeze into stillness, not moving, scarcely breathing, while they listened. She could not remember who first told her that those furious hoofbeats meant the patrollers were going past, in pursuit of a runaway. Only the slaves said patterrollers, whispering the word.

Old Rit would say a prayer that the hoofbeats would not stop. If they did, there would be the dreadful sound of screams. Because the runaway slave had been caught, would be whipped, and finally sold to the chain gang.

Thus Harriet already shared the uneasiness and the fear of the grownups. But she shared their pleasures, too. She knew moments of pride when the overseer consulted Ben, her father, about the weather. Ben could tell if it was going to rain, when the first frost would come, tell whether there was going to be a long stretch of clear sunny days. Everyone on the plantation admired this skill of Ben's. Even the master, Edward Brodas.

The other slaves were rather in awe of Ben because he could prophesy about the weather. Harriet stood close to him when he studied the sky, licked his forefinger and held it up to determine the direction of the wind, then announced that there would be rain or frost or fair weather.

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There was something free and wild in Harriet because of Ben. He talked about the arrival of the wild ducks, the thickness of the winter coat of muskrats and of rabbits. He was always talking about the woods, the berries that grew there, the strange haunting cries of some of the birds, the loud sound their wings made when they were disturbed and flew up suddenly. He spoke of the way the owls flew, their feathers so soft that they seemed to glide, soundless, through the air.

Ben knew about rivers and creeks and swampy places. He said that the salt water from the Bay reached into the rivers and streams for long distances. You could stick your finger in the river water and lick it and you could taste the salt from the Bay.

He had been all the way to the Chesapeake. He had seen storms there. He said the Big Buckwater River, which lay off to the southeast of the plantation, was just a little stream compared to the Choptank, and the Choptank was less than nothing compared to the Bay.

All through the plantation, from the Big House to the stables, to the fields, he had a reputation for absolute honesty. He had never been known to tell a lie. He was a valued worker and a trusted one.

Ben could tell wonderful stories, too. So could her mother, Old Rit, though Rit's were mostly from the Bible. Rit told about Moses and the children of Israel,

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about how the sea parted so that the children walked across on dry land, about the plague of locusts, about how some of the children were afraid on the long journey to the Promised Land, and so cried out: "It had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness."

Old Rit taught Harriet the words of that song that the slaves were forbidden to sing, because of the man named Denmark Vesey, who had urged the other slaves to revolt by telling them about Moses and the children of Israel. Sometimes, in the quarter, Harriet heard snatches of it, sung under the breath, almost whispered: "Go down, Moses. . . ." But she learned the words so well that she never forgot them.

She was aware of all these things and many other things too. She learned to separate the days of the week. Sunday was a special day. There was no work in the fields. The slaves cooked in the quarter and washed their clothes and sang and told stories.

There was another special day, issue day, which occurred at the end of the month. It was the day that food and clothes were issued to the slaves. One of the slaves was sent to the Big House, with a wagon, to bring back the monthly allowance of food. Each slave received eight pounds of pickled pork or its equivalent in fish, one bushel of Indian meal (corn meal), one pint of salt.

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Once a year, on issue day, they received clothing. The men were given two tow-linen shirts, two pairs of trousers, one of tow-linen, the other woolen, and a woolen jacket for winter. The grownups received one pair of yarn stockings and a pair of shoes.

The children under eight had neither shoes, stockings, jacket nor trousers. They were issued two tow-linen shirts a year—short, one-piece garments made of a coarse material like burlap, reaching to the knees. These shirts were worn night and day. They were changed once a week. When they were worn out, the children went naked until the next allowance day.

Men and women received a coarse blanket apiece. The children kept warm as best they could.

And so Harriet knew about Sunday which came once a week, about issue day which occurred once a month. She learned to divide time into larger segments too, based on changes of the season. There was seedtime when warmth began to creep back into the land. This was followed by the heat of summer. Then heat lay over the fields like a blanket; the bent backs of the field hands glistened in the sun, black backs wet with sweat. The fields seemed to shimmer in the sunlight.

The overseer, a white man on horseback, stayed on the edge of the field, in the shade. He seemed to shimmer too, as though all the heat of the sun were concentrated

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on him, a hot white light playing over him, even though he lingered in the shade. When for some reason the slaves stopped their rhythmical singing, he would shout, "Make a noise there! Make a noise there! Bear a hand!" and he cracked the black-snake whip he carried. It made a hissing sound like a snake.

After the heat of the summer, the year turned toward the fall, the nights began to grow cooler. Then came harvest, one of the best times of the year, when the big full moon lit the fields and the slaves worked late, singing songs that had a lilt in them, songs that were like a thanksgiving for the abundance of the crop.

Even better than that was the Christmas season. For Christmas was a long holiday, a whole stretch of days, until after New Year's. The slaves had little work to do. They kept the fires going, looked after the animals, milked the cows, fed and watered the livestock. The gaiety and laughter from the Big House reached all through the quarter. There were presents for everybody, and rare treats of sweet cakes and bits of candy, gay ribbons. The quarter was as filled with the sound of singing and of laughter as the Big House.

Harriet thought that Christmas was the very best time of all. By tradition there was no work. The holiday for the field slaves lasted as long as the Yule log burned in the fireplace at the Big House. So the people in the

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quarter spent days preparing the log. They chose a big one, so big that the strongest field hands bent their backs under its weight. They soaked it in water, so that it would burn slowly and for a long time.

It was cold at Christmastime, cold in the winter there on the Eastern Shore. Yet Harriet liked the winter. She watched the flickering light from the fire. It cast long dancing shadows against the smoke-darkened walls. She knew and liked the damp earthy smell of the dirt floor, even though they slept on the floor, huddled under thin ragged blankets, aware of the chill. Even though on windy nights, puffs of smoke blew back down the chimney, making them cough, yet she still liked the cold months when the fire was lit.

At night, inside the cabin, she felt safe. But with the coming of morning, she was always a little frightened. In the early morning dark, not yet sunrise, but a grayness in the sky, a slight lifting of the darkness, she heard and recognized the long low notes of the overseer's horn, calling the field hands to work. Then she would hear the sound of running feet, sound of curses, the thud, thud of blows, falling on the head and back of the last field hand out of the quarter.

And so at six, Harriet already knew fear and uneasiness. She knew certain joys too, the joy of singing, the warmth from a pine-knot fire in a fireplace, the flickering

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light that served as decoration, making shadows on the walls, changing, moving, dancing, concealing the lack of furniture.

She was accustomed to the scratchy feel of the tow-linen shirt she wore. Because she went barefooted, the soles of her feet were calloused, but the toes were straight, never having known the pinch of new shoes or any kind of foot covering.

She was a solemn-eyed, shy little girl, slow of speech, but quick to laugh. She was always singing or humming, under her breath, pausing in her play to look upward, watching the sudden free flight of the birds, listening to the cherokee of the redwing blackbirds, watching a squirrel run up the trunk of a tree, in the nearby woods, studying the slow drift of cumulus clouds across a summer sky.

This period of carefree idleness was due to end soon. The fierce old woman who looked after the children kept telling Minta that things would change.

Whenever she saw the little girl stop to look at the trees, the sky, she repeated the same harsh-voiced warning: "Overseer'll be settin' you a task any day now. Then you won't be standin' around with your mouth hangin' open, lookin' at nothin' all day long. Overseer'll keep you movin'."

SIX YEARS OLD

Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, died at Monticello in Virginia on July 4, 1826. He was eighty-three years old.

His original draft of the Declaration contained a "vehement philippic against Negro slavery." Congress eliminated this. But these words were left intact: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

This idea, part of Jefferson's legacy to America, written down in one of the country's noblest documents, was incompatible with the idea of legalized slavery. Yet it was an integral part of the heritage of all Americans, and so it troubled the minds of men in the North and in the South, long after Jefferson's death.

Many a slave carried the dream of freedom in his heart because of these words of Jefferson's. Not because the slave had read them, but because they were written down somewhere, and other people had read them, and ideas are contagious—particularly ideas that concern the rights of man.

4.

Hired Out

IN THE SUMMER of 1826, Harriet was six years old and, by plantation standards, big enough to work. She carried water to the field hands, and listened to their rhythmical singing, watched how the movement of their hands, their bodies, was paced to the rhythm of the song.

She was old enough to have a sense of family. She enjoyed being with her father and her mother, her brothers and sisters. There were ten children now, either living in the cabin, because they worked on the master's plantation, or else living so near it that they could visit Ben and Old Rit.

That year, in the fall, a woman drove up to the Big House in a wagon. She went inside and stayed for quite a while. Almost as soon as she arrived, word of what she wanted was relayed through the quarter.

This woman had come to see the master. She wanted

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to hire one of the master's slaves, preferably a girl, and young, because she couldn't pay very much. The woman said that any of the little ones running around the cabins would do. The house slave who brought this whispered news to the quarter said that the woman wasn't quality. She was barely a cut above poor white folks, when compared to the master. She was a weaver, and the wife of a man named James Cook, a man who hunted and trapped for a living.

Before six-year-old Harriet knew what was happening, she was seated in the wagon, beside this strange white woman who was now her mistress. She had been "hired out" by the master, Edward Brodas. Mrs. James Cook was going to pay him a small sum a month for the services of Harriet.

Harriet sat in the wagon, frightened, listening to the clop-clop of the horses' feet. They kept going farther and farther away from the quarter on the plantation, where she had been born and brought up. They went through the woods, along an old road, called a rolling road, though she did not know it. These roads were made in the days when tobacco was the chief crop on the Eastern Shore, and hogsheads of tobacco were rolled down to the wharves, and the boat landings, and the roads thus made still bear the name "rolling road."

When the wagon finally stopped near a house, Har-

riet was disappointed in it. It was not like the Big House. It was built of logs, just like the cabins in the quarter. But at least it was near a river, though she never knew the name of the river. Once she got inside, she found it had more than one room, and it had an upstairs. She had never before been inside a house where people had a separate room in which they slept. For she had never been in the Big House. There was no reason why she should. Even Old Rit didn't go there—unless she was sent for.

Mrs. Cook was a weaver. She spent most of the day in front of a big loom, head bent, arms moving back and forth. Harriet was supposed to help her. She stood for hours, winding yarn, her hands clumsy, unaccustomed to the job she had to do, the thread catching, catching on the rough places on her fingers. The air was filled with fuzz and lint, so that she kept sneezing and dropping the yarn.

It seemed to Harriet that the clatter of the loom and the whirr and thump of the spinning wheel went on day and night, too. It confused her. She longed to be back in the quarter, in the cabin with Ben and Rit. She was afraid. She was lonesome.

She hated the inside of the house. She slept in the kitchen, in a corner near the fireplace; toward morning, when the fire went out, she slept with her feet tucked

in and under the warm ashes because it was so cold at night. These people fed her scraps of food, much as they might have fed a dog.

The woman said Harriet was clumsy, slow, no help at all, so the man set her to watching his trap lines. He had his traps set for muskrats.

It was cold by the river but Harriet didn't mind. It was quiet there. She was away from the clatter of the loom. She could breathe without getting her mouth and nose full of lint. As she walked the length of Cook's trap line she saw an occasional gunning skiff, heard the wild free crying of the water birds, watched them fly up, wings spread wide.

She learned to stand still, on the bank of the river, and thus she saw the muskrats swimming, noses above water, watched them dive. She discovered the burrows they made in the bank, built with mud and bits of straw. By careful watching, she was able to distinguish the dark brown fur of a muskrat, near the burrow, though they were the same color as the mud along the bank.

One morning she woke up coughing, eyes watering, feeling sick, hot, utterly miserable. Mrs. Cook said that slaves were always pretending to be sick in order to avoid work, that young as Minty was, she too had learned to slack off on her work; they seemed to be born knowing how to do this.

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So James Cook sent Minty out to inspect his trap lines. She stumbled along, head down, vision blurred by the watering of her eyes. She wasn't crying—but her eyes kept filling up with tears. The water in the river was so cold that she shuddered as she waded along the edge. She had to wade to see if the traps had been sprung. She bent over, shivering, examining a trap, not liking the scaly look of the tails of the muskrats and yet not liking to see them caught in the traps. They wouldn't swim any more, wouldn't dive any more, after they were caught. They had an unpleasant musky smell but she still didn't like to see them held fast in the traps.

When she went back to the house, a small bent-over figure, shivering and shaking, it was obvious that she was really sick. Mrs. Cook got a blanket and threw it over her, wondering audibly what was wrong with Minty.

She was so sick that Old Rit heard about it, and went to Edward Brodas and asked him to take Minty away from Cook's, to let her come home where Rit could look after her. The master consented. He was fond of Old Rit and he did not want to lose Harriet if he could help it. Sometimes there in the quarter, when they nursed themselves, they got well; they all seemed to have an inexplicable knowledge of the curative power of the roots and herbs that grew in the woods and the meadows.

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Rit nursed Harriet back to health. It was six weeks before she was really well. She had the measles. Because of the wading in the cold water of the river, she developed bronchitis. Rit kept giving her a hot and bitter brew, made from the root of a plant that Ben brought back from the woods.

There was always a huskiness in Harriet's voice after that. It stayed there for the rest of her life, an undertone that made her singing voice memorable. It lent an added timbre to her speaking voice.

As soon as Harriet recovered, was once more playing with the young children, running and laughing, singing, listening to the stories told by the old folks, the master sent her back to the house of James Cook.

Rit grumbled about it, first to herself, and then to Ben when he came home from the woods.

"Minty's back at Cook's," she said.

He nodded, neither approving nor disapproving.

She thought, he already knows it, probably word got to him in the woods. "They're poor folks," she said. "Not much better than white trash. Can't afford to own any slaves. Can't even afford to hire full-grown ones. So they take Minty."

He said calmly, "Well, at least—"

Rit went on, her voice raised. "They get her for almost nothing. About all she costs 'em is for her food and

there ain't much of that from the look of her when she came back to the quarter. Nothing but skin drawn over bones. No meat on her at all."

Ben said, "Maybe she'll learn to be a weaver."

"Maybe she won't," Rit answered sharply as though he were arguing with her. "That's another thing. Quality don't work at nothing like that. The wives don't work and they don't give the orders. Shows what kind of folks the Cooks are. She gives the orders. She works at the weaving. Weaves other folks' cloth for them—"

Then she stopped talking, and sighed, thinking, of course if Minty did learn to weave, it would be good. She'd never know the bite of the overseer's whip, never know what it felt like to hold a hoe in rough, work-hardened hands, never give off the choking stink of the field hand.

She said, hopefully, "Maybe she'll learn to be a weaver."

Ben nodded. "Perhaps," he said cautiously. "If not a weaver—something else. She's smarter'n all the rest put together."

When Minta, or Minty, whose Christian name was Harriet, went back to the Cooks, she soon learned that she was to stay indoors and learn to weave. She was not to walk Cook's trap lines any more.

She felt like the muskrats, one moment she had seen

them diving and swimming in the river, and then suddenly click! and they were caught fast in the trap. She remembered that some of them had fought to free themselves, tearing fur and flesh to get free.

She decided that she simply would not learn to weave. She would not! She hated being inside the house with the loom and the spinning wheel and the endless hanks of yarn. There was always lint in the air. She was always cold. She did not get enough to eat. She wanted to go home where she could be outdoors.

The woman that she called her mistress was always cross. She kept telling her that she was stupid, stupid, stupid.

And so, finally, Cook's wife sent Harriet back to the Brodas plantation. She said that she was unteachable, intractable, hopelessly stupid.

Early in the nineteenth century, the dream of freedom had begun spreading through the slave cabins on all the plantations. Almost every night, somewhere in the South, a slave slipped away from the quarter. They hid in swamps. They walked incredible distances. Some of them reached the North and freedom. Others were caught and brought back in chains. There were few plantations that could boast that they had never had a slave run away.

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By 1826 there were so many fugitive slaves living in Canada that plantation owners in Maryland and Kentucky persuaded Henry Clay, then Secretary of State, to ask the Canadian Government to work out a plan whereby these fugitives, worth thousands of dollars, could be lawfully returned to their owners.

The Americans waited eagerly for an answer. It was a long time coming, and when it finally arrived, it was most unsatisfactory. The Canadian Government stated that the request of the American Secretary of State had been received. And that was all. There was no suggestion made as to how American slaveowners could obtain the slaves who had taken refuge in Canada.

Flight

EVERY NIGHT in the quarter, after the children were asleep, Old Rit and Ben talked about Harriet. Old Rit started the conversation.

"What's going to happen to Minty?" she asked.

Ben stirred under the ragged quilt, and then turned over. "You have to trust in the Lord, Rit. He'll take care of her."

Rit ignored his reply. "Here she is back on the plantation again. She's seven years old and she hasn't learned anything special. You know the Master isn't going to keep her around here, just kicking up her heels and eating her head off. What'll happen to her?"

This time Ben did not answer. They both knew things weren't going well with the master. He needed money. He was hiring out more and more of his slaves. He was selling more and more of them each year. The plantation was beginning to have a ragged, uncared for look. The

fences were down. Honeysuckle and bull briar were slowly taking over the big fields. The outbuildings needed repair.

Rit touched Ben on the arm, lightly, to attract his attention. Then she whispered, "The trader's back in Cambridge again. He's got the big front room at the tavern. Less than two months and he's back again. He didn't used to come so often."

She waited for Ben to say something, to reassure her. He knew just as she did that when the trader got ready to leave, some of the master's prime hands were sure to go with him. Well, not exactly with him. They'd go with the chain gang, walking down that long, terrible road that ended in New Orleans or Natchez, chained two by two, and another chain down through the middle of the group, and each slave chained to that, too. She'd heard the white folks call it a coffle or drove, but to her it was always simply the chain gang.

"Nothing's going to happen to Minty," Old Ben said, sharply. "I'll see that it don't."

The sharpness in his voice told her that he was thinking about the chain gang too, and remembering their two little ones, just about the size of Minty, who had gone away like that. One minute they had been carrying water to the field hands, and the next minute they were in a lot with the other slaves that had been sold, sort of

thrown in for good measure, and then—gone—gone with the chain gang.

But there's nothing Ben can do, she thought. He can try, of course. But the trader had a reputation for driving a hard bargain, and if the master needed the money, and one extra child meant a slightly better price for the lot—why, even Ben wouldn't be able to stop the sale.

Rit gave a long sigh. "I wish the old days were back again. The days when the Master was rich and just raised tobacco, just nothing but tobacco. And everybody worked. Even the little slaves helped squash those fat juicy hornworms that get on the backside of the tobacco leaves. And everybody had plenty to eat and we all felt safe. In the old days the Master never sold off any of his slaves. Everybody knew that and—"

Ben agreed with her. "Yes," he said slowly, "things was better then. It seems like they seesaw more now. He grows a little cotton, and he grows a little wheat, and he grows a little corn. Then maybe there's too much rain, or maybe not enough rain, so the crop's no good. Now he's selling the big timber off to the shipbuilders. Pretty soon there won't be any more of them big stands of oaks. We keep hacking 'em down, day after day we're hacking 'em down. What's he going to do when his timber's gone?"

"You know what he's going to do," Rit said impatiently. "He's going to keep on raising slaves and selling them off. He gets enough money just from that. He don't have to bother to have his land worked any more. He's just living off his slaves."

Living off his slaves, she thought, and little Minty doesn't know how to cook or sew, and the slave trader is in Cambridge—and maybe tomorrow he'll be riding out here.

"Oh, Ben," she said, "what's going to happen to Minty?"

"I guess maybe we just better pray to the good Lord to look out for her," he said. "We just better pray—"

A few days later, Harriet was hired out again, as a child's nurse. Rit said, "May the Lord be praised, it's an answer to my prayer, to my prayer. May the Lord be praised."

Once again, Harriet, the small girl in the tow-linen shirt, barefooted, feet not touching the floor of the wagon, sat listening to the clop-clop of horses' hoofs, listening to the creak of a wagon that was carrying her farther and farther away from home.

Her forehead was wrinkled by a frown because she kept thinking: Where am I going this time? How long will it take to get there? Why do I have to go anywhere?

Suppose she didn't like the people. What could she do about it? She wouldn't know how to get back home.

Finally the wagon stopped in front of a big house. She never did know where it was located, near what town, how far away from the Brodas plantation. But she soon knew what she was supposed to do. She looked after Miss Susan's baby and helped with the housework, too. It wasn't a big family, just Miss Susan and her husband, and the baby, and Miss Emily, a sister of Miss Susan's who was visiting.

That first morning, Miss Susan told her to go and sweep the parlor and dust it. Harriet was awed by the room. There was a thick carpet on the floor, soft and springy under her feet, like walking on layers of pine needles, and there were so many different kinds of chairs and tables, and the wood around the fireplace was carved into a pattern. She'd never seen anything like it.

She swept as hard as she could, and then immediately dusted all the dark shiny wood of the furniture.

Miss Susan said, "Have you finished?" and came in to run her fingers over the shiny surface of the chairs and tables. Her fingers were coated with dust. "Do it again," she snapped. "Are you just plain stupid? Why, you haven't dusted in here at all. You do it right—or—"

Harriet swept again, and then dusted, getting more and more frightened. Miss Susan said it wasn't done

properly and went and got a whip and kept whipping her and shouting at her; and Harriet screamed.

She heard a voice calling, "Susan! Susan! What are you doing? What is the matter?"

Miss Emily had heard the screams and came downstairs, protesting, "Why do you whip the child, Susan, for not doing what she has never been taught to do? Leave her to me a few minutes, and you will see that she will soon learn how to sweep and dust a room."

Harriet learned how to clean the house. She looked after the baby, too. In later life, she said, "I was so little that I had to sit on the floor and have the baby put in my lap. That baby was always in my lap except when it was asleep or its mother was feeding it."

Miss Susan said that the baby mustn't be allowed to cry. Harriet had to keep rocking it so it wouldn't cry. Every night the same thing happened. She sat on the floor and rocked the cradle back and forth, back and forth, until the baby went to sleep. Then her head drooped, her eyelids closed, her hand started slipping, slipping, slipping away from the dark polished wood of the cradle. Finally she slept, on the floor, by the cradle.

Then the baby would wail, suddenly, a thin, high, piercing sound. Miss Susan would wake up, furious, and reach for the whip she kept on a little shelf behind her bed.

Harriet finally reached a point in exhaustion where she was past needing sleep, where she snatched it in brief moments, head nodding, eyes closed, and yet not really asleep, prepared to start rocking the cradle before the baby woke up and cried.

Even so, sometimes she went sound asleep, to be awakened by the wailing of the baby. She was whipped so often that the back of her neck was covered with scars, crisscrossed with scars, so deep that they would be visible for the rest of her life. Finally she learned to sleep without really going to sleep, learned to listen while still asleep, head nodding, eyes closed, but all her senses alerted to the slightest movement from the cradle, listening, listening, and yet asleep. So that if the baby stirred, she started rocking the cradle.

She thought of running away, and didn't. She did not know how to reach the Brodas plantation, did not know in which direction to walk, assuming that she could have got away from the house. She had no idea how far it was. It had seemed an interminable journey when the overseer brought her to Miss Susan's in a wagon.

Sometimes Miss Susan and her husband went out to parties. Then there were plumes on Miss Susan's bonnet, and she wore a silk dress, soft, swishy, and embroidered petticoats underneath, making a rustling sound when she walked. She smelled of orrisroot. And the master

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would smile at Miss Susan, and toy with his watch chain.

On those nights, the baby cried and cried, while Harriet slept. Harriet slept and yet she was listening. Sound asleep but listening. Not for the baby. Ears straining, even in sleep, for the sound of footsteps on the stairs, not even footsteps, just the creak of the stairs, and she was awake, because it meant Miss Susan was coming home. Thus she learned to stay alert even though she was deeply, restfully asleep.

During the day, she toyed with the idea of running away. Then she would thrust the thought from her as impossible.

Yet she did run away. Years afterward, she described what happened in these words: "One morning, after breakfast, Miss Susan had the baby, and I stood by the table waiting until I was to take it; near me was a bowl of lumps of white sugar. My mistress got into a great quarrel with her husband; she had an awful temper, and she would scold and storm and call him all kinds of names.

"Now you know, I never had anything good, no sweet, no sugar; and that sugar, right by me, did look so nice, and my mistress's back was turned to me while she was fighting with her husband, so I just put my fingers in the sugar bowl to take one lump and maybe she heard me for she turned and saw me.

"The next minute she had the rawhide down. I give

FLIGHT

one jump out of the door and I saw that *they* came after me, but I just flew and *they* didn't catch me. I ran and I ran and I passed many a house, but I didn't dare to stop for they all knew my mistress and they would send me back."

She ran until she was exhausted. She kept looking over her shoulder. After a while she didn't see Miss Susan and her husband. She decided that they must have got tired and stopped chasing her. She slowed her pace, then at the thought of having to go back to Miss Susan and whatever form of punishment she and her husband would have devised, she started running again.

She said, "By and by when I was almost tuckered out, I came to a great big pigpen. There was an old sow there, and perhaps eight or ten little pigs. I was too little to climb into it, but I tumbled over the high part and fell in on the ground; I was so beaten out that I could not stir.

"And there I stayed from Friday until the next Tuesday, fighting with those little pigs for the potato peelings and the other scraps that came down in the trough. The old sow would push me away when I tried to get her children's food, and I was awfully afraid of her. By Tuesday I was so starved I knew I had to go back to my mistress. I didn't have anywhere else to go, even though I knew what was coming. So I went back."

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That same year, 1827, Henry Clay, who was still Secretary of State, appealed to the Canadian Government again. He asked for some kind of agreement in regard to the return of the hundreds of fugitive slaves living in Canada. After five months had gone by, the Canadians said: "It is utterly impossible to agree to a stipulation for the surrender of fugitive slaves."

In the city of New York, two Negroes, John Russwurm and the Reverend Mr. Samuel Cornish, began to publish Freedom's Journal, the first Negro newspaper in the United States.

6.

The Underground Road

HARRIET WAS BACK on the Brodas plantation, back in the slave quarter. Miss Susan brought her back and told the master that Minta wasn't "worth a sixpence."

Old Rit sniffed her contempt for Miss Susan when she saw Minta. The child was little better than skin and bones. She was as filthy as though she'd been living in a hog wallow, and her neck and back were covered with scars, old scars crisscrossed with fresh ones from the beating Miss Susan and her husband had given her because she ran away.

It was slow work, but Old Rit got the fresh scars healed up, and then when Harriet began to get a little flesh on her bones, Brodas hired her out again.

In a way, Harriet had won a victory—though Rit did not think so. Harriet worked in the fields from then on. Brodas hired her out to a man who kept her out of doors. She loaded wood on wagons, split rails, and knew more

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about mules and hoes and plows than she did about the interior of a house. Despite her strong sturdy body, she was still a child. Yet she was often ordered to perform jobs that would have taxed the strength of a full-grown, able-bodied man. If she failed in any of these backbreaking jobs, she was beaten.

Her appearance began to change. The solemn-eyed, shy little girl, hesitant of speech, had disappeared. She was replaced by a sullen-eyed creature, the lids hanging heavily over the eyes. She had the calloused work-hardened hands of a field slave.

She no longer wore the tow-linen shirt, the one garment worn by the children. She wore a long one-piece dress, tied around the middle with a piece of rope. She looped the skirts up when she was in the field. She was still barefooted.

She worked from dawn to dusk, worked in the rain, in the heat of the sun. Her muscles hardened. She sang when she was in the fields or working in the nearby woods. Her voice was unusual because of the faint huskiness. Once having heard it, people remembered it. The low notes were rich and deep. The high notes were sweet and true. Like the other slaves, she made up the words and the melody of most of the songs that she sang, never singing them exactly the same way.

In 1831, Harriet started wearing a bandanna. It was made from a piece of brilliantly colored cotton cloth. She

THE UNDERGROUND ROAD

wound it around her head, deftly, smoothly, and then tied it in place, pulling the knots tight and hard. This new headgear was an indication that she was no longer regarded as a child. These colorful bandannas were worn by young women; they were a symbol of maturity.

Though the life she led was cruelly hard, she was more nearly content than she had ever been before. She was working outdoors. She felt free in the fields. No matter how hard the job assigned to her, she could always pause for a moment in her work and watch the slow drift of the clouds overhead, study the swift flight of the birds. Even in summer, when heat waves rose from the land, there was a fresh smell from the woods close by.

Sometimes this short, straight-backed young girl hummed under her breath, or sang, while she hoed the corn or tugged on the reins when a refractory mule refused to budge. True, work in the fields had calloused her hands, but it had given her a strong, erect body. She carried her head proudly as she sang.

That year, 1831, when Harriet regarded herself as sufficiently grown up to wear a bandanna, she kept hearing a strange, fascinating story, told and retold, in the quarter, in the fields. This same story about a slave named Tice Davids was being told in the Big House, too. But with a difference. The slaves told it with relish, the masters with distaste.

Tice Davids ran away from his master in Kentucky.

He planned to cross the Ohio River at Ripley. But his master followed so close behind him that Tice had to jump in the river and swim across.

The master hunted for a boat, and while hunting, never lost sight of Tice, kept watching his head, just above the water, as he swam toward the opposite shore. Once in the boat, the master followed him, saw him plainly, swimming faster and faster. The master drew so near to him that when Tice stood up in the water and started to run, he could see the water splashing about his thighs. He saw him reach the shore. The master grounded the boat, jumped out—not more than five minutes behind the slave.

He never saw Tice Davids again. He combed the countryside; he searched the antislavery town of Ripley. He knew that the town had a reputation of being hostile to slaveholders, had heard vaguely of a Reverend John Rankin who served as watchdog and guardian of runaways—Even so. Tice Davids had disappeared right before his master's eyes.

The master went back to Kentucky and told about this strange disappearance, how his slave, Tice, had literally vanished before his eyes. Puzzled, disturbed more than he cared to admit, he explained this mystery by saying, "He must have gone on an underground road."

Harriet was puzzled by this story. She kept thinking about it. Was there a road that ran under the ground?

Was that how Tice Davids had escaped from his master? If Tice could find it, could other people find it, too?

People in the border states, who had been sheltering runaway slaves, helped further the mystery of an underground road. The new steam trains were being talked about everywhere. A rumor started, and spread, to the effect that there was an underground railroad too.

The free Negroes, the Quakers, the Methodists, the German farmers, who helped runaway slaves in Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, started using phrases and words suited to the idea of a railroad. They called themselves conductors, stationmasters, brakemen. Their houses and barns and haystacks, and the unsuspected secret passages inside the big farmhouses, were called depots and stations. They referred to the runaways as passengers, parcels, boxes, bales of black wool. Large parcels were grown-ups; small parcels were children.

In 1831 there were many people like the young Harriet, who believed that there really was a steam train that ran through a deep underground tunnel from South to North, and that a slave who could board it in the South, at some unknown point, would emerge a free man, in a free state, when the train came up out of the ground, snorting and puffing, leaving a trail of smoke and cinders behind it. Certainly the story of Tice Davids suggested that this was true.

This mysterious underground railroad was spoken of, in whispers, in the quarter on the Brodas plantation, just as it was on all the other plantations.

In that same year, in August, in October, in November, the slaves in the quarter and the masters in the Big Houses began to talk about another story. In the quarter, the name of the man who was involved was never spoken aloud. It was always whispered, as though the land, the trees, the sky, the rivers and coves had ears. For this was a horror story. Its details were known all over the United States. Like the other slaves, Harriet knew the story as accurately and as completely as though she had been an eyewitness to the event.

It was the story of Nat Turner. He was a slave, in Southampton, Virginia. He was called The Prophet. He was a preacher.

When he was a boy, growing up, his mother told him, over and over, that he would be like Moses. He would lead his people out of slavery as Moses had led the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt. She taught him verses and whole chapters of the Bible which she had memorized. He memorized them too, especially the ones that dealt with the prophets in the Old Testament.

He was a silent, brooding man, given to fasts and contemplation, going often, alone, into the caves of the mountains, in the section of Virginia where he lived.

He believed himself to be a prophet. He claimed that he saw visions.

On the night of August 20, 1831, he said to six of his followers: "Our race is to be delivered from bondage, and God has appointed us as the men to do His bidding; I am told to slay all the whites we encounter, men, women and children . . . it is necessary that in the commencement of this revolution all the whites we meet must die."

They set out together, Nat Turner and his six followers, and at every plantation where they stopped, other slaves joined them, until there were seventy of them altogether. They killed sixty white persons, men, women and children, found on plantations within a radius of twenty miles.

The local militia and Federal troops were called in to quell this unplanned and unrehearsed insurrection. All through the South, slaveholders were terrified. Though one hundred Negroes were killed in the process of putting down this revolt, Nat Turner could not be found. He stayed hidden in a cave in Southampton County for two months. He was finally found, and executed on November 11, 1831.

On the Brodas plantation, the slaves whispered about The Prophet too.

Harriet, wearing her first bandanna, working in the fields, thought about him, brooded about him. There was

no question but that they all wanted freedom—but at such a price—

After November 11th, the whispering in the cabins went on endlessly, night after night, while the fire died down in the fireplaces. Every night in the quarter on the Brodas plantation, Harriet heard an old black woman hunched over, clay pipe in her mouth, mutter, "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe." The fire flared and set the shadows on the walls to trembling.

After the Nat Turner insurrection, fear hung over the plantations from Virginia on down through Maryland, down to Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi. The slaveholders lived in dread because the most faithful house slave might at any moment become another Nat, attacking the master, in the dead of night, with no warning.

New laws were passed in the slave states and the old laws were more rigidly enforced. Nat Turner had been a silent, brooding slave. Get rid of the silent ones. He had been a preacher, he had talked about the children of Israel, about Moses—therefore there must be no more Sunday schools for children who were slaves, no more separate church services for the slaves. They must not be permitted to congregate anywhere, at any time. Must not be allowed to talk freely to each other. Under no circumstances must they be permitted to learn to read

and write. Make it a crime for anyone to teach them.

Once again the slaves were forbidden to sing "Go down, Moses," the song with the sound of thunder in the chorus: "Let my people go!"

Harriet thought that the ghost of Nat Turner had joined the ghost of Denmark Vesey, the carpenter and free man. Twin ghosts now haunted the Big Houses, the fields, the masters, the overseers, the slave traders, the slave drivers. She wondered if they hovered over the shuffle of slaves being driven down one of the old overland routes to Natchez or New Orleans, whispering taunts, crying revenge, bloody revenge, revolt, bloody revolt.

The Virginia Assembly met in December, 1831. The subject of slavery was introduced because some of the counties, alarmed by the Nat Turner insurrection, had petitioned for the gradual emancipation of the slaves or for abolition of slavery.

Two farmers, whose landholdings were small when compared to the great areas controlled by some of the Virginia slaveholders, were outspoken in their criticism of the institution of slavery.

Phillip Bolling: "We talk of freedom while slavery exists in the land, and speak with horror of the tyranny of the Turk; but we foster an evil which the best interests

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of the community require shall be removed and to which we trace the cause of the depression of eastern Virginia."

Henry Berry: "Pass as severe laws as you will to keep these unfortunate creatures in ignorance, it is in vain unless you can extinguish that spark of intellect which God has given them . . . can man be in the midst of freedom and not know what freedom is? A death struggle must come in which one or the other class is extinguished forever."

"Shuck This Corn"

IT WAS THE FALL of the year. The corn and wheat were being harvested. The harvesting of the corn was, traditionally, the occasion for rejoicing. The days were getting shorter, the nights were perceptibly cooler, the year was turning toward the Christmas season and the long holiday which the entire countryside would celebrate—both the masters and the slaves.

In Dorchester County there were parties on the big plantations, the clink of glasses, the sound of singing, carriages arriving at the Big House.

In the fields, late in the day, afternoon merging into night, a cornhusking bee was in progress on the Brodas plantation. The corn had been stacked in a great mound. The master had invited his friends to send their slaves to help shuck the corn.

The slaves had mounded the corn up, higher, higher,

higher, dark hands lifting the ears of corn, slight rustle from the ears, two or three hundred slaves moving around the great stack.

When the corn was mounded up, the best singer among the slaves, the one with the highest, clearest, truest voice, climbed to the top of the stack and led off the singing. The song was always improvised, except for the repeated Oh! Oh! Oh! of the chorus. There was something wild and beautiful about this singing; the sun was going down, the feel of frost in the air, and the knowledge that once the song was done, they would husk the corn, swiftly, singing something else, hands moving in time to the beat of whatever the new song would be, a song in praise of the land, the harvest, a kind of propitiation to the land, and a song of thanksgiving, too:

I

*Master's slaves are slick and fat,
Oh! Oh! Oh!
Shine just like a beaver hat,
Oh! Oh! Oh!*

Refrain:

*Turn out here and shuck this corn,
Oh! Oh! Oh!
Biggest pile seen since I was born,
Oh! Oh! Oh!*

II

*Barrett's slaves are lean and thin
Oh! Oh! Oh!
Can put their food on the end of a pin
Oh! Oh! Oh!*

Refrain:

*Turn out here and shuck this corn,
Oh! Oh! Oh!
Biggest pile seen since I was born,
Oh! Oh! Oh!*

One of Barrett's slaves stood silent at the foot of the big pile of corn. Harriet watched him, aware that the overseer was watching him, too. A silent slave was not liked by overseers, because a silent slave was probably brooding about escape or revolt. He might have persuaded the others to take part in whatever it was that he was plotting. He might be another Denmark Vesey or Nat Turner— She watched him and felt a prickle of fear run through her.

As that last high-pitched rhythmic Oh! Oh! Oh! rang out across the field, the slaves set to work husking the corn, racing with each other, to see who could husk the most in the shortest possible time. They started singing a new song, its tempo faster and faster, the movement of their hands paced to the rhythm of the song, and the

sound of the rustling of the husks of the corn like an accompaniment.

Harriet watched Barrett's slave, her own hands moving swiftly, stripping the husks from the corn, enjoying the fading light, the coolness that lay over the land, the look of the cornfield now that the crop was harvested, noticing all these things, and working, and yet watching the big young man who stood silent, whose hands moved slowly, desultorily.

She leaned over to pick up an ear of corn, and when she looked for him, he was moving away. His swiftly moving figure was in strange contrast to the languorous slow motion of his hands just a few minutes before.

The overseer did not see him until he was halfway across the field. He called to him, ordering him to come back. The big young man kept going, faster now. The overseer followed him, the black-snake whip in his hand.

Harriet went too. There would be trouble. She knew there was going to be trouble, she could always tell when it was coming, by the peculiar fluttering of her heart. It was a warning signal, and it was telling her now that something dreadful was going to happen.

They went down one of the old rolling roads, the slave running, and the overseer running too. He was not on horseback, he had not expected trouble, in the middle of a husking bee, an occasion for frolicking and fun. Harriet followed close behind.

The slave ducked inside the door of the store at the crossroads. The overseer went after him. Harriet heard him say that he would whip him right then and there, and thus teach him not to run away from his work. He called for help, to tie the slave. He ordered Harriet to help hold him.

She did not move. She stood there just inside the door watching these two. The overseer could not hope to whip the slave unless someone helped tie him up. The big young man who belonged to Barrett dodged past the overseer, head down, and was through the door and gone—just that fast.

Harriet moved in front of the doorway, stood there, blocking it. The overseer, startled by this sudden obstructing body, planted squarely in the doorway, turned away from the door, picked up a two-pound weight from the counter, and hurled it at the fleeing slave.

The weight missed the slave. It struck Harriet in the forehead, leaving a great open gash there. She was thrown backward from the force of the blow. She was brought back to the quarter, unconscious, bleeding.

In the quarter the slaves came to look at her. They said that she would surely die. No one could survive with a great hole in the head like that, with the good warm blood, the life's blood draining out. So much blood. Even Brodas came to look at her. And couldn't conceal his dismay at the sight of her.

Old Rit hovered over her, a prayer on her lips. Not this child, she couldn't lose this one. Two of her girls had been sold already, sold South, part of the chain gang, crying, protesting, pulling back, and the chains pulling them forward, clanking sound of the chains, cracking sound of the whip of the driver.

Old Rit nursed Harriet alone, unaided. She even called in the old man that they said could conjure, though she doubted that any conjurer in the world could save this child. At night, in the flickering light from the fire, it seemed to her that the wound, that great hole in the forehead, throbbed.

That night, in the slave cabins in the quarter, they talked about Harriet. If she lived, she would be sold South; the overseer and the master would not keep an intractable, defiant slave, a slave who refused to help the overseer tie up a runaway, blocking the door like Harriet did. She would be sold. It was a dangerous thing that she had done. Dangerous, yes, but a brave thing, too. Why wasn't she afraid? What had made her so bold? And someone spoke of Denmark Vesey: "We are slaves." And Denmark's answer: "You deserve to be!"

The cornhusking was forgotten, the fun of it, the singing, the capering that had gone on while they husked the corn.

Ghosts wandered in the quarter, whispered in the

quarter. Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner haunted the Big House, too. The master couldn't sleep. He kept listening, wondering. Were they plotting something out there in the quarter? Why were they so quiet? Or were they? The air seemed to be filled with whispering voices.

Night after night the slaves kept creeping into the cabin to look at Harriet. They knew that the overseer was trying to sell her, trying to sell this dozing, half-conscious young girl, who never moved from the pallet on the floor.

November came and passed. Then it was Christmas. Harriet was in a stupor most of the time, deaf to the laughter, the dancing and the singing, deaf to the clack of the bones, the beat of the juba.

Right after Christmas the overseer began again, trying to sell her. Neighboring farmers came and looked at her and snorted their refusal to buy her; some of them laughed and said Brodas was crazy to try to sell such a wreck; others said he would have to pay them to take her off his hands, not worth a sixpence—sell her? ha! ha! ha!

Harriet stayed in the cabin from Christmas until March, and toward the end of this long period of inertness, she began to pray for the conversion of Edward Brodas, repeating the same prayer, over and over again, "Change his heart, Lord, convert him."

In March, too, when it was obvious that she was getting

better, she learned that she and her brothers were to be sold South, part of the next chain gang. Austin Woodfolk, the slave trader, was in Cambridge, and Brodas had arranged for her sale.

The knowledge that she would be sold terrified her. There was always an ache in her skull, a pounding. The wound had healed but it was still painful. She was subject to violent headaches. What was worse, she never knew at what moment she would suddenly go to sleep. It was as though she lost consciousness. She never knew when this would happen or for how long a period of time. When she slept like that, she could not be roused. It was like a coma. She could remember what had gone on just before the period of unconsciousness, could pick up a conversation, the threads of it. If she was talking herself when she suddenly went to sleep, she would finish whatever she was going to say when she awakened.

But she was going to be sold. Going to be sold. She changed the prayer that she said every night. She no longer prayed for the master's conversion. She said, "Lord, if you're never going to change that man's heart—*kill him*, Lord, and take him out of the way—"

"*Kill him*, Lord!" She said it over and over again. She knew she could not survive that trip South with the chain gang, survive the slave driver's whip. She might suddenly go to sleep. She was unable to move when she

went into that curious trancelike sleep. She would be beaten. She would die on the road, on that old slave road that ran straight on down into the deep South. She thought she could hear the clank of the chains, could see her brothers watching her die, unable to do anything about it.

"*Kill him*, Lord," she prayed. She knew she couldn't run away. She might be found sitting sound asleep, not a mile away from the plantation, motionless by the side of the road, in plain view.

A few days later she heard that Edward Brodas, the master, was sick, and that the doctor had told the family he would surely die. His body servant whispered the word to the mistress's personal maid, who told the kitchen help, who relayed the message to the coachman, who told one of the stable boys, who told one of the children, who ran like the wind, to tell Harriet and Old Rit. The message was transmitted mouth to ear, ear to mouth, with gestures made by swift-moving hands that showed just how sick the master was.

And then, suddenly, one morning the master was dead. The field hands knew he was dead before the overseer knew it. And no one watching them could really have said how the news spread so fast, the length and breadth of the whole plantation, though the word went from the master's bedroom, to the kitchen, then to the stable, then

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to the quarter, where the little children managed to tell the field hands while they brought the water to them.

It was planting time, and the backs of the field hands were bent as they leaned over the long rows, sun glistening on their bare backs. Seedtime. Seedtime.

The overseer, a man on horseback watching them, suddenly shouted, "Make a noise there!" because a hush fell over the field.

They began to sing. But it was a slow-moving song, pitched higher than anything he had ever heard, with a wail in it that made him shiver, and the words made him shiver, too:

*He know moon-rise, he know star-rise,
But he done lain his body down.*

*Old master'll walk in the moonlight, he'll walk in the
starlight
To lay his body down.*

*Old master'll walk in the graveyard,
He'll walk through the graveyard,
To lay his body down.*

*Old master'll lie in the grave and stretch out his arms,
To lay his body down.*

Old Rit told Harriet that the master was dead. She didn't need to tell her. When Harriet heard that long slow wail from the fields, she knew he was dead. She lay on the

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floor of the cabin, motionless, conscience-stricken, filled with horror. She believed that her prayers had killed him.

In Boston, on January 1, 1831, William Lloyd Garrison published the first issue of his antislavery newspaper, The Liberator. The following statement appeared on the front page of the first issue:

"I will be harsh as truth and as uncompromising as justice, on this subject [slavery]. I do not want to think or write with moderation. No! No!"