

## 8.

## *Minta Becomes Harriet*

THERE WAS PANIC in the quarter. The master was dead. Would the slaves be sold? Would all these families be separated and scattered about the countryside? The older slaves whispered to each other, saying: "Did he free us as he promised?"

Harriet, conscience-stricken, believing that her prayers had killed Edward Brodas, ignored the fear in the voices, the faces, of the slaves. She said, later, of this period, "It appeared like I would give the world full of silver and gold, if I had it, to bring that poor soul back. . . . I would give *myself*; I would give everything!"

The slaves were quickly reassured. The overseer told them that the plantation was to remain intact. It had been willed to an heir who was too young to administer it. It would be managed by the young master's guardian, Dr. Anthony Thompson, a minister in Bucktown. According to the master's will, none of the slaves could be sold outside the state of Maryland.

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This information ended the whispered, panicky conversations in the quarter. It did nothing to end Harriet's feeling of guilt. Her common sense told her that her prayers could not possibly have killed the master. Yet she was not quite certain. This incident of the master's death following so swiftly after her reiterated plea, *Kill him, Lord*, left her with the conviction that prayer was always answered.

She was uneasy, too. She knew that she was no longer regarded as a desirable slave. There was always the possibility that Dr. Thompson, once he heard the story of the way in which she had defied an overseer, would decide to sell her, lest she transmit to the other slaves the same spirit of rebellion.

Once again she toyed with the idea of running away. Somehow the urgency was gone. Old Rit and Ben were here on the plantation. So were her brothers and sisters. All of them had joyously accepted the announcement that nothing was to be changed.

But who could be certain? The master had promised to free Old Rit, but he hadn't. He had never been cruel to his slaves. But he hired them out to men who were cruel. He sold them whenever the need arose. He had tried to sell her when she was sick and worthless. No one could know what this temporary master, Doc Thompson, as he was known in Bucktown, would be like. He would prob-

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ably continue the old master's practice of hiring out slaves.

She knew what it was like to be hired out. One moment she had been a laughing child, running through the woods, chasing rabbits, playing with the other small children in the quarter, and the next moment she had been picked up and taken to the home of James Cook and set to work doing jobs that a child should not have been expected to do.

She would always remember Miss Susan and the whip that she kept on the little shelf behind her bed, always remember how desperately tired she got because she never had enough sleep. She could see herself a child, rocking a baby in a cradle, rock, rock, rock; could see herself sick with the measles, walking the length of Cook's trap line, in winter, shivering, eyes watering. She remembered how she had hated the scaly tails of the muskrats, the wild smell of them, and yet did not want to find them caught fast in the traps.

Long afterward, she said of this period in her life, "They [the slaveholders] don't know any better, it's the way they were brought up. 'Make the little slaves mind you, or flog them,' was what they said to their children, and they were brought up with the whip in their hands. Now that wasn't the way on all plantations; there were good masters and mistresses, as I've heard tell, but I didn't happen to come across any of them."

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After the terrible wound in her head had healed, she became aware of the admiration of the other slaves. Even the old ones listened to her opinions, deferred to her. Though Old Rit continued to deplore the audacity, the boldness in Harriet that made her defy an overseer, she stopped calling her Minta or Minty. So did the others.

She was Harriet now to all of them. It was as though the pet names, the diminutives, were no longer suitable for a teen-aged girl who bore on her forehead a great scar, irradicable evidence of the kind of courage rarely displayed by a grownup.

Though the wound in her head had healed, she was subject to periods of troubled sleep, she had strange dreams which recurred night after night. These dreams had a three-dimensional quality in which people and places were seen more clearly, more sharply than in her waking moments. At night, in the quarter, she described these dreams or visions, as she called them, to the other slaves. Even in the telling, something of the reality of the dream came through to the others, so that they were awed by her.

As soon as she was able to work again, Doc Thompson hired out Harriet and her father, Ben, to John Stewart, a builder. At first Harriet worked in his house, doing the housework that she despised.

There was no question but what she was well enough to work, though she sometimes had severe headaches,

especially if she got very tired. Then the ache was like a pounding inside her skull. The headaches did not bother her as much as the sudden onset of that deep trancelike sleep which still occurred without warning.

Whenever she thought of running away, not so often now, the knowledge of this awful weakness stopped her. She knew that she might be found asleep by the side of the road, and brought back immediately. The deep scar on her forehead made her easily recognized.

She was afraid to leave and yet she could not bear the life she led, inside all day, sweeping and dusting, making beds, washing clothes. The house was so near the woods that she could hear the ring of the axes, hear the crash as a great tree came down.

After three months of housework, she asked Stewart, her temporary master, if she could work in the woods with the men. "I always did field work," she explained. "So I can swing a ax just like a man."

Stewart knew she was strong. He had seen her bring in big logs for the fireplaces, had once stopped to watch in unconcealed amazement as she carried a tremendous iron caldron filled with hot water from the cookhouse to a nearby stream. He did not have to pay her old master, Doc Thompson, very much for her hire because she was a woman. If she could do a man's work, felling trees, splitting logs, he'd be getting a bargain.

"We can try it," he said. "If it don't work out why you'll have to go back to cooking and cleaning."

But it did work out. Harriet was delighted. She knew that Stewart was pleased with the new arrangement for shortly afterward he allowed her to "hire her time." This was a privilege which was extended to trustworthy slaves who were good workers. It meant that Harriet could find jobs for herself, and would pay Stewart fifty or sixty dollars a year. Whatever she earned over and beyond this sum, she was allowed to keep.

She sought and found jobs that would keep her out of doors. She hauled logs, plowed fields, drove an oxcart. She became a familiar figure in the fields—a slender, muscular young woman, with her skirts looped up around her waist and a vivid bandanna tied on her head. Dressed in this fashion, she did the rough hard work of a prime field hand.

During this period, she often worked with Ben, her father. John Stewart placed Ben in charge of the slaves who cut the timber which was to be sent by boat to the Baltimore shipyard. For weeks at a time Harriet swung a broadax in the woods as part of Ben's crew, cutting half a cord of wood a day just like a man.

She learned most of the woods lore that she knew from Ben: the names of birds, which berries were good to eat and which were poisonous, where to look for water lilies,

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how to identify the hemlocks and the plant that he called cranebill, wild geranium or crane's bill. For these things—bark of hemlock, root of water lily, leaf of crane's bill—had medicinal value. The slaves used them to cure all sorts of ailments, fevers and intestinal disorders.

Harriet was an apt pupil. Ben said that her eyes were sharper than his. She said, "No. It's not just my eyes. It's my hands, too." She thought her hands seemed to locate the root or herb she was seeking before she actually saw it.

Ben taught her how to pick a path through the woods, even through the underbrush, without making a sound. He said, "Any old body can go through a woods crashing and mashing things down like a cow. That's easy. You practice doing it the hard way—move so quiet even a bird on a nest don't hear you and fly up."

Neither of them ever discussed the reasons why it was desirable to be able to go through the woods soundlessly. Discussion wasn't necessary. Deep inside herself Harriet knew what Ben was doing. He was, in his own fashion, training her for the day when she might become a runaway, and a successful flight would depend on the stealth of her movements through the woods that bordered all the roads.

When she was nineteen, Ben rewarded her efforts with praise. She had followed him through the woods and

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though he moved quietly himself, he had not heard her, although she was close behind him. When they reached a clearing, she came up in back of him and touched him lightly on the arm. He jumped, startled, and then laughed when he saw Harriet standing beside him.

He said, "Hat, you walk like a Injun. Not even a leaf make a rustle, not even a twig crack back on itself when you come through there."

She was tremendously pleased by this. She thought if only her master, John Stewart, would stop having her exhibit her strength for the entertainment of his guests, she would be content to spend the rest of her life on this plantation hiring herself out. The work was hard, yes, but now that she was grown, she could do the most back-breaking jobs without effort. Besides the workday was lightened and shortened by moments of fun, by words of praise like those of Ben's, by the endless wonder and beauty of the woods.

Unfortunately, Stewart had long since discovered that she was as strong as any of the men on the plantation. She could lift barrels of produce, could shoulder heavy timbers. Whenever he had visitors, he gave orders that she was to be hitched to a boat loaded with stone and was to drag it behind her as she walked along the edge of the river. She could hear cries of astonishment, laughter, applause from the men who stood on the bank watching.

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This audience of fashionably dressed planters made her feel that she was little better than a trained animal, brought out for their amusement.

Though Stewart continued to have her perform for his friends, she remained with him, hiring her time, for six years.

*In Boston, on October 21, 1835, William Lloyd Garrison, publisher of The Liberator, was rescued from a mob of some two thousand well-dressed, eminently respectable men who were intent on hanging him. The mayor and the constables got Garrison away from the crowd and finally lodged him in the Leverett Street Jail for safety.*

*That night, then, bespectacled William Lloyd Garrison wrote on the wall of his cell: "William Lloyd Garrison was put into this cell on Monday afternoon, October 21, 1835, to save him from the violence of a respectable and influential mob, who sought to destroy him for preaching the abominable and dangerous doctrine that all men are created equal, and that all oppression is odious in the sight of God."*

## 9.

### *The Patchwork Quilt*

IN 1843, Harriet Ross began to make a patchwork quilt. She had trouble finding the brilliantly colored pieces of cotton cloth she needed. Sewing the quilt together was even harder.

The needle kept slipping through her fingers. Sometimes she did not know that she had lost it, until she tried to take a stitch and found that she held only a long piece of thread. Time and again she hunted for the needle on the dirt floor of the cabin. It was difficult to find it there, difficult for fingers accustomed to grasping the handle of a broadax to pick up an object as tiny as a needle.

It seemed as though she would never be able to master the art of sewing, to make the needle go through the material in the places where she wanted it to go. It was the hardest task she had ever undertaken.

Yet as the quilt pattern developed, she thought it was as beautiful as the wild flowers that grew in the woods and

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along the edge of the roads. The yellow was like the Jerusalem flower, and the purple suggested motherwort, and the white pieces were like water lily, and the varying shades of green represented the leaves of all the plants, and the eternal green of the pine trees.

For this was no ordinary quilt. It would be trousseau, and the entire contents of what under different circumstances would have been a hope chest. Harriet had fallen in love. She was going to marry a young man named John Tubman. He was a tall, well-built fellow, with a ready laugh, and a clear lilting whistle.

When she worked on the quilt, head bent, awkward fingers guiding the needle carefully through the material, she experienced a strange, tender feeling that was new to her. The quilt became a symbol of the life that she would share with John. She thought about him while she sewed, how tall he was, how sweet the sound of his whistling. She was so short she had to look up to him. She looked up to him for another reason, too. He was free. He had always been free. Yet he wanted to marry her and she was a slave. So she felt humble, too.

They were married in 1844. Harriet went to live in his cabin, taking with her her one beautiful possession, the patchwork quilt.

The knowledge that she was still a slave bothered her more and more. If she were sold, she would be separated

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from John. She truly loved him. She had asked him how he came to be free. He said it was because his mother and father had been freed by their master, at the time of the master's death.

This made Harriet wonder about her own family, especially about Old Rit, who was forever talking about the promises of freedom that had been made to her. She paid five dollars to a lawyer to look up the wills of the various masters to whom Old Rit had belonged. It had taken her years to save five dollars, she had hoarded pennies to accumulate such a sum. But it seemed to her the information she received was well worth the cost. She found that Old Rit had originally been willed to a young woman named Mary Patterson, with the provision that she was to be freed when she was forty-five. Mary Patterson died shortly afterward, still unmarried. According to the lawyer, Old Rit should have been freed long ago. Instead she remained a slave, and so, of course, her children were slaves. Old Rit had been sold and resold many times.

After this, Harriet grew more and more discontented. She felt that she was a slave only because Old Rit had been tricked and deceived, years ago.

Times were hard the year that Harriet married John Tubman. And the next year, too. In the quarter she heard a great deal of talk about the reasons for this. One of the

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house servants said the trouble was due to the difference in the price of cotton. Dr. Thompson had said so. He said cotton brought thirteen cents a pound in 1837, and when it was high, the slave traders paid as much as a thousand dollars for prime field hands. Then cotton started going down, down, down, until now in 1845 it was bringing only five cents a pound, and the slave traders gave less than five hundred dollars for young strong slaves.

Harriet decided that from the dilapidated look of the plantation—fields lying fallow, the Big House in need of repair—Doc Thompson would soon be selling slaves again. He wouldn't be able to get much for them in Maryland, so in spite of the old master's will, he would sell them South.

She told John Tubman this. Every time she said it, she spoke of going North, of running away, following the North Star.

He warned her against such foolishness. What would she find there that she didn't have here? She hired her time, and so she always had a little money of her own. They had a cabin to themselves. Maryland was a good place to live. It never got too cold. There were all the coves and creeks where one could fish and set traps.

He said that if she went North, she'd freeze to death. Besides, what happened to the ones who went there? None of them came back to tell what it was like. Why

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was that? Because they couldn't. They died there. They must have. If they were still alive, they would have returned to show the way to some of the rest of the slaves. None returned. None sent back word. What would she have there that she didn't have here?

Her reply was always the same: "I'd be free."

She told him about the dreams she had, how night after night, she dreamed that men on horseback came riding into the quarter, and then she heard the shrieks and screams of women and children, as they were put into the chain gang, that the screaming of the women made her wake up. She would lie there in the dark of the cabin, sweating, feeling cold because the fire was out, and the chill from the dirt floor seemed to have reached her very bones, and, though awake, she could still hear the echo of screams.

When she went back to sleep she would dream again. This time she was flying. She flew over cotton fields and cornfields, and the corn was ripe, the tassels waving all golden brown in the wind, and then she flew over Cambridge and the Choptank River, and she could see the gleam of the water, like a mirror, far down, under her, and then she came to a mountain and flew over that. At last she reached a barrier, sometimes it was a fence, sometimes a river, and she couldn't fly over it.

She said, "It appeared like I wouldn't have the strength, and just as I was sinking down, there would be

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ladies all dressed in white over there, and they would put out their arms and pull me across—”

John Tubman disliked these dreams. When she retold them, her husky voice pitched low, she made them sound as though they had really happened. He thought this showed how restless and impatient she had become. He laughed at her, finally. He said that she must be related to Old Cudjo, who was so slow-witted he never laughed at a funny story until a half hour after it was told. Because only a slow-witted person would have the same dream all the time.

In spite of his derision, she kept telling him about her dreams. She said that on clear nights the North Star seemed to beckon to her. She was sure she could follow that star. They could go North together. Then she would be free too. Nothing could part them then.

He decided he would put an end to this talk of escape, of the North, and freedom. He asked what she would do when the sky was dark. Then how would she know which way was North? She couldn't read the signs along the road. She wouldn't know which way to go. He would not go with her. He was perfectly satisfied where he was. She would be alone, in the dark, in the silence of the deep woods. What would she eat? Where would she get food?

She started to say: in the woods. She could live a long time on the edible berries and fruit that she had

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long ago learned to recognize. And yet—she had seen many a half-starved runaway brought back in chains, not enough flesh left on him to provide a decent meal for a buzzard. Perhaps she, too, would starve. She remembered the time she ran away from Miss Susan's and crawled into a pigpen, remembered the squealing and grunting of the pigs, the slops thrown into the trough, and fighting with the pigs, pushing them away, to get at the trough. After four days she had been indistinguishable from the pigs, filthy, foul-smelling—and starving. So she had gone back to Miss Susan. The memory of this experience made her avoid John's eyes, not answer him.

Perhaps her silence made him angry. He may have interpreted it as evidence of her stubbornness, her willfulness, her utter disregard of all his warnings, and so made a threat which would put a stop to this crazy talk about freedom.

He shouted at her, “You take off and I'll tell the Master. I'll tell the Master right quick.”

She stared at him, shocked, thinking, he couldn't, he wouldn't. If he told the master that she was missing, she would be caught before she got off the plantation. John knew what happened to runaways who were caught and brought back. Surely he would not betray his own wife.

And yet—she knew that there were slaves who had



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betrayed other slaves when they tried to escape. Sometimes they told because they were afraid of the master, it was always hard on the ones who were left behind. Sometimes the house servants were the betrayers, they were closest to the masters, known to be tattletales, certain to be rewarded because of their talebearing.

But John Tubman was free. And free Negroes helped the runaways. It was one of the reasons the masters disliked and distrusted them. Surely John would not deny freedom to her, when he had it himself. Perhaps he was afraid he would be held responsible for her escape, afraid the master would think John had incited her to run away. Besides, he was satisfied here, he had said so, and men disliked change, or so Old Rit had told her, saying also that women thrived on it.

Then she thought, frowning, but if a man really loved a woman, wouldn't he be willing to take risks to help her to safety? She shook her head. He must have been joking, or speaking through a sudden uncontrollable anger.

"You don't mean that," she said slowly. But he did mean it. She could tell by the way he looked at her.

For the tall young man with the gay laugh, and the merry whistle, had been replaced by a hostile stranger, who glared at her as he said, "You just start and see."

She knew that no matter what words she might hear

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during the rest of her life, she would never again hear anything said that hurt like this. It was as though he had deliberately tried to kill all the trust and the love and the deep devotion she had for him.

That night as she lay beside him on the floor of the cabin, she felt that he was watching her, waiting to see if this was the night when she would try to leave.

From that night on, she was afraid of him.

*In the spring of the same year, Thomas Garrett, Quaker, who since 1822 had been offering food and shelter to runaway slaves in Wilmington, Delaware, was tried and found guilty of breaking the law covering fugitive slaves. Found guilty with him was John Hunn, a stationmaster of the Underground Railroad in Middletown, Delaware, and a much younger man.*

*The trial was held in the May Term of the United States Court, at New Castle, before Chief Justice Taney and Judge Hall.*

*The fines and damages that Garrett had to pay took every dollar of his property. His household effects and all his belongings were sold at public auction. The sheriff who conducted the sale turned to Garrett and said, "Thomas, I hope you'll never be caught at this again."*

*Garrett, who was then sixty years old, answered: "Friend, I haven't a dollar in the world, but if thee*

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*knows a fugitive anywhere on the face of the earth who needs a breakfast, send him to me."*

*During the operation of the Underground Railroad, twenty-five hundred slaves passed through Garrett's "station" in Wilmington.*

10.

*"A Glory over Everything"*

ONE DAY, in 1849, when Harriet was working in the fields, near the edge of the road, a white woman wearing a faded sunbonnet went past, driving a wagon. She stopped the wagon, and watched Harriet for a few minutes. Then she spoke to her, asked her what her name was, and how she had acquired the deep scar on her forehead.

Harriet told her the story of the blow she had received when she was a girl. After that, whenever the woman saw her in the fields, she stopped to talk to her. She told Harriet that she lived on a farm, near Bucktown. Then one day she said, not looking at Harriet, but looking instead at the overseer, far off at the edge of the fields, "If you ever need any help, Harriet, ever need any help, why you let me know."

That same year the young heir to the Brodas estate died. Harriet mentioned the fact of his death to the white

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woman in the faded sunbonnet, the next time she saw her. She told her of the panic-stricken talk in the quarter, told her that the slaves were afraid that the master, Dr. Thompson, would start selling them. She said that Doc Thompson no longer permitted any of them to hire their time. The woman nodded her head, clucked to the horse, and drove off, murmuring, "If you ever need any help—"

The slaves were right about Dr. Thompson's intention. He began selling slaves almost immediately. Among the first ones sold were two of Harriet Tubman's sisters. They went South with the chain gang on a Saturday.

When Harriet heard of the sale of her sisters, she knew that the time had finally come when she must leave the plantation. She was reluctant to attempt the long trip North alone, not because of John Tubman's threat to betray her, but because she was afraid she might fall asleep somewhere along the way and so would be caught immediately.

She persuaded three of her brothers to go with her. Having made certain that John was asleep, she left the cabin quietly, and met her brothers at the edge of the plantation. They agreed that she was to lead the way, for she was more familiar with the woods than the others.

The three men followed her, crashing through the underbrush, frightening themselves, stopping constantly

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to say, "What was that?" or "Someone's coming."

She thought of Ben and how he had said, "Any old body can go through a woods crashing and mashing things down like a cow." She said sharply, "Can't you boys go quieter? Watch where you're going!"

One of them grumbled, "Can't see in the dark. Ain't got cat's eyes like you."

"You don't need cat's eyes," she retorted. "On a night like this, with all the stars out, it's not black dark. Use your own eyes."

She supposed they were doing the best they could but they moved very slowly. She kept getting so far ahead of them that she had to stop and wait for them to catch up with her, lest they lose their way. Their progress was slow, uncertain. Their feet got tangled in every vine. They tripped over fallen logs, and once one of them fell flat on his face. They jumped, startled, at the most ordinary sounds: the murmur of the wind in the branches of the trees, the twittering of a bird. They kept turning around, looking back.

They had not gone more than a mile when she became aware that they had stopped. She turned and went back to them. She could hear them whispering. One of them called out, "Hat!"

"What's the matter? We haven't got time to keep stopping like this."

"We're going back."

"No," she said firmly. "We've got a good start. If we move fast and move quiet—"

Then all three spoke at once. They said the same thing, over and over, in frantic hurried whispers, all talking at once:

They told her that they had changed their minds. Running away was too dangerous. Someone would surely see them and recognize them. By morning the master would know they had "took off." Then the handbills advertising them would be posted all over Dorchester County. The patterollers would search for them. Even if they were lucky enough to elude the patrol, they could not possibly hide from the bloodhounds. The hounds would be baying after them, snuffing through the swamps and the underbrush, zigzagging through the deepest woods. The bloodhounds would surely find them. And everyone knew what happened to a runaway who was caught and brought back alive.

She argued with them. Didn't they know that if they went back they would be sold, if not tomorrow, then the next day, or the next? Sold South. They had seen the chain gangs. Was that what they wanted? Were they going to be slaves for the rest of their lives? Didn't freedom mean anything to them?

"You're afraid," she said, trying to shame them into action. "Go on back. I'm going North alone."

Instead of being ashamed, they became angry. They shouted at her, telling her that she was a fool and they would make her go back to the plantation with them. Suddenly they surrounded her, three men, her own brothers, jostling her, pushing her along, pinioning her arms behind her. She fought against them, wasting her strength, exhausting herself in a furious struggle.

She was no match for three strong men. She said, panting, "All right. We'll go back. I'll go with you."

She led the way, moving slowly. Her thoughts were bitter. Not one of them was willing to take a small risk in order to be free. It had all seemed so perfect, so simple, to have her brothers go with her, sharing the dangers of the trip together, just as a family should. Now if she ever went North, she would have to go alone.

Two days later, a slave working beside Harriet in the fields motioned to her. She bent toward him, listening. He said the water boy had just brought news to the field hands, and it had been passed from one to the other until it reached him. The news was that Harriet and her brothers had been sold to the Georgia trader, and that they were to be sent South with the chain gang that very night.

Harriet went on working but she knew a moment of panic. She would have to go North alone. She would have to start as soon as it was dark. She could not go

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with the chain gang. She might die on the way, because of those inexplicable sleeping seizures. But then she—how could she run away? She might fall asleep in plain view along the road.

But even if she fell asleep, she thought, the Lord would take care of her. She murmured a prayer, "Lord, I'm going to hold steady on to You and You've got to see me through."

Afterward, she explained her decision to run the risk of going North alone, in these words: "I had reasoned this out in my mind; there was one of two things I had a *right* to, liberty or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other; for no man should take me alive; I should fight for my liberty as long as my strength lasted, and when the time came for me to go, the Lord would let them take me."

At dusk, when the work in the fields was over, she started toward the Big House. She had to let someone know that she was going North, someone she could trust. She no longer trusted John Tubman and it gave her a lost, lonesome feeling. Her sister Mary worked in the Big House, and she planned to tell Mary that she was going to run away, so someone would know.

As she went toward the house, she saw the master, Doc Thompson, riding up the drive on his horse. She turned aside and went toward the quarter. A field hand

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had no legitimate reason for entering the kitchen of the Big House—and yet—there must be some way she could leave word so that afterward someone would think about it and know that she had left a message.

As she went toward the quarter she began to sing. Dr. Thompson reined in his horse, turned around and looked at her. It was not the beauty of her voice that made him turn and watch her, frowning, it was the words of the song that she was singing, and something defiant in her manner, that disturbed and puzzled him.

*When that old chariot comes,  
I'm going to leave you,  
I'm bound for the promised land,  
Friends, I'm going to leave you.*

*I'm sorry, friends, to leave you,  
Farewell! Oh, farewell!  
But I'll meet you in the morning,  
Farewell! Oh, farewell!*

*I'll meet you in the morning,  
When I reach the promised land;  
On the other side of Jordan,  
For I'm bound for the promised land.*

That night when John Tubman was asleep, and the fire had died down in the cabin, she took the ashcake that had been baked for their breakfast, and a good-

sized piece of salt herring, and tied them together in an old bandanna. By hoarding this small stock of food, she could make it last a long time, and with the berries and edible roots she could find in the woods, she wouldn't starve.

She decided that she would take the quilt with her, too. Her hands lingered over it. It felt soft and warm to her touch. Even in the dark, she thought she could tell one color from another, because she knew its pattern and design so well.

Then John stirred in his sleep, and she left the cabin quickly, carrying the quilt carefully folded under her arm.

Once she was off the plantation, she took to the woods, not following the North Star, not even looking for it, going instead toward Bucktown. She needed help. She was going to ask the white woman who had stopped to talk to her so often if she would help her. Perhaps she wouldn't. But she would soon find out.

When she came to the farmhouse where the woman lived, she approached it cautiously, circling around it. It was so quiet. There was no sound at all, not even a dog barking, or the sound of voices. Nothing.

She tapped on the door, gently. A voice said, "Who's there?" She answered, "Harriet, from Dr. Thompson's place."

When the woman opened the door she did not seem at all surprised to see her. She glanced at the little bundle that Harriet was carrying, at the quilt, and invited her in. Then she sat down at the kitchen table, and wrote two names on a slip of paper, and handed the paper to Harriet.

She said that those were the next places where it was safe for Harriet to stop. The first place was a farm where there was a gate with big white posts and round knobs on top of them. The people there would feed her, and when they thought it was safe for her to go on, they would tell her how to get to the next house, or take her there. For these were the first two stops on the Underground Railroad—going North, from the Eastern Shore of Maryland.

Thus Harriet learned that the Underground Railroad that ran straight to the North was not a railroad at all. Neither did it run underground. It was composed of a loosely organized group of people who offered food and shelter, or a place of concealment, to fugitives who had set out on the long road to the North and freedom.

Harriet wanted to pay this woman who had befriended her. But she had no money. She gave her the patchwork quilt, the only beautiful object she had ever owned.

That night she made her way through the woods,

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crouching in the underbrush whenever she heard the sound of horses' hoofs, staying there until the riders passed. Each time she wondered if they were already hunting for her. It would be so easy to describe her, the deep scar on her forehead like a dent, the old scars on the back of her neck, the husky speaking voice, the lack of height, scarcely five feet tall. The master would say she was wearing rough clothes when she ran away, that she had a bandanna on her head, that she was muscular and strong.

She knew how accurately he would describe her. One of the slaves who could read used to tell the others what it said on those handbills that were nailed up on the trees, along the edge of the roads. It was easy to recognize the handbills that advertised runaways, because there was always a picture in one corner, a picture of a black man, a little running figure with a stick over his shoulder, and a bundle tied on the end of the stick.

Whenever she thought of the handbills, she walked faster. Sometimes she stumbled over old grapevines, gnarled and twisted, thick as a man's wrist, or became entangled in the tough, sinewy vine of the honeysuckle. But she kept going.

In the morning, she came to the house where her friend had said she was to stop. She showed the slip of paper that she carried to the woman who answered her

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knock at the back door of the farmhouse. The woman fed her, and then handed her a broom and told her to sweep the yard.

Harriet hesitated, suddenly suspicious. Then she decided that with a broom in her hand, working in the yard, she would look as though she belonged on the place, certainly no one would suspect that she was a runaway.

That night the woman's husband, a farmer, loaded a wagon with produce. Harriet climbed in. He threw some blankets over her, and the wagon started.

It was dark under the blankets, and not exactly comfortable. But Harriet decided that riding was better than walking. She was surprised at her own lack of fear, wondered how it was that she so readily trusted these strangers who might betray her. For all she knew, the man driving the wagon might be taking her straight back to the master.

She thought of those other rides in wagons, when she was a child, the same clop-clop of the horses' feet, creak of the wagon, and the feeling of being lost because she did not know where she was going. She did not know her destination this time either, but she was not alarmed. She thought of John Tubman. By this time he must have told the master that she was gone. Then she thought of the plantation and how the land rolled gently down to-

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ward the river, thought of Ben and Old Rit, and that Old Rit would be inconsolable because her favorite daughter was missing. "Lord," she prayed, "I'm going to hold steady onto You. You've got to see me through." Then she went to sleep.

The next morning when the stars were still visible in the sky, the farmer stopped the wagon. Harriet was instantly awake.

He told her to follow the river, to keep following it to reach the next place where people would take her in and feed her. He said that she must travel only at night, and she must stay off the roads because the patrol would be hunting for her. Harriet climbed out of the wagon. "Thank you," she said simply, thinking how amazing it was that there should be white people who were willing to go to such lengths to help a slave get to the North.

When she finally arrived in Pennsylvania, she had traveled roughly ninety miles from Dorchester County. She had slept on the ground outdoors at night. She had been rowed for miles up the Choptank River by a man she had never seen before. She had been concealed in a haycock, and had, at one point, spent a week hidden in a potato hole in a cabin which belonged to a family of free Negroes. She had been hidden in the attic of the home of a Quaker. She had been befriended by stout German farmers, whose guttural speech surprised her and whose

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well-kept farms astonished her. She had never before seen barns and fences, farmhouses and outbuildings, so carefully painted. The cattle and horses were so clean they looked as though they had been scrubbed.

When she crossed the line into the free state of Pennsylvania, the sun was coming up. She said, "I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person now I was free. There was such a glory over everything, the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in heaven."

*In December, 1849, most of the speeches made in Congress dealt with the need for a more stringent fugitive slave law.*

*In January, 1850, Mr. Mason of Virginia said the existing law was inadequate: "You may as well go down into the sea and endeavor to recover from his native element a fish which had escaped from you as expect to recover a fugitive. Every difficulty is thrown in your way by the population."*

*Mr. Clingman of North Carolina stated that there were some 30,000 fugitives in the North—worth \$15,000,000. Something must be done about it.*



# 11.

## *Stranger in a Strange Land*

HARRIET TUBMAN'S moment of exultation passed quickly. According to her own words: "There was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom. I was a stranger in a strange land, and my home after all was down in the old cabin quarter with the old folks, and my brothers and sisters."

When she thought of her family, left behind in Maryland, all of them slaves, her joy in having escaped rapidly left her. She decided that as soon as she could, she would go back to Dorchester County and lead her family North, too. She knew the way now. She knew what a fugitive would do on the nights when it rained, and the North Star was obscured. She had groped her way along, fingering the bark of trees, finding out on which side the moss grew the thickest, moving slowly from tree to tree. Her hands had been cold, and the moss was spongy and wet, the bark of the trees was rough.

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But she had done it once, alone, and with the help of the Lord, she would do it again, and again, until she got all of her family out of Maryland.

That year, 1849, she went to work in a hotel in Philadelphia, as a cook. She had always hated housework. She felt trapped inside the kitchen where she worked. Yet she stayed there a year, cooking, washing dishes and pots and pans, scrubbing the floor. She saved most of the money she earned, hoarding the tips she was given. She would need money when she went back into slave territory.

At first she found Philadelphia a strange and frightening place. The streets were filled with people. There was the constant movement of horses and wagons and fine carriages. The buildings were taller than any she had ever seen. She was constantly surprised by the number of colored people that she saw, by their speech, and the fine clothes that they wore. She soon learned that many of these people were fugitive slaves like herself.

She knew moments of homesickness when she longed for the quarter, remembering the old familiar smoky smell of the cabin, the good smell of the earth when it was plowed in the spring.

Early in 1850 she visited the office of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee. Sooner or later all fugitive slaves in the city went there seeking information about their