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Escape of Jane

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Escape of Jane

THE ESCAPE OF JANE
A True Story of the Underground Railroad

By Henry Burke & Dick Croy



Escape of Jane

This is a fictionalized account of an actual escape in August, 1843, of a slave and her seven children from a Virginia plantation on land once owned by George Washington. All the major characters and events are real, portrayed as reported in newspapers and historical documents of the time. Some minor characters and incidents are real as well, while others are fictional characterizations intended to illustrate and add detail to the historical setting—and most especially the operation of the Underground Railroad—in Washington County and southeastern Ohio, ca 1843.

Among the pertinent newspaper articles of the period is a story headlined "Escape of Slaves"—in the August 24, 1843, edition of the *Marietta Intelligencer*—about the escape across the Ohio River and the capture and court appearance of two of the slaves who accompanied Jane's family. Another artifact is a yellowed copy of the \$450 reward poster that slave master Solomon Harris had printed up.

It describes Jane as "a woman of low stature and very fleshy, and about fifty years of age, something lame in one leg when walking." Harris's contemptuous description of this courageous mother of seven serves only to underscore the heroic journey she undertook to save her family. Yet it was but one among tens of thousands of such stories of heroism and compassion, by black and white Americans alike, on the Underground Railroad.

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"Come in, gal. What be on yer min'?"

John was a wizened, grey-haired slave in his late 50s whom alcohol, hard work and the sun had aged beyond his years, most of them spent here on the Harris plantation in Bull Creek, Virginia. Master Harris had given Jane to him twenty-one years earlier after selling Justin, the father of her four eldest children, down the river. Though Jane and Justin had jumped the broomstick, Harris's disregard for the African wedding ceremony was typical of slaveowners when auction time came around. Many wouldn't permit the formality of marriage among their slaves, and those who did would never allow it to interfere with their own claims.

Jane had never loved another man after her husband was taken from his family. Besides, she had always been far too independent to live with a messy, unkempt man like John even though the kind old man was the father of her three youngest children. Jane and her family had continued to live in their own cabin, and John visited only when he wanted sex, which wasn't very often these days.

Over the years John had become Solomon Harris's drinking buddy, of homemade whiskey from a still they'd built together a mile or so from the plantation's living quarters. Harris's religious wife wouldn't allow him to drink in their home, and the formality if not the social distinction between master and slave had gradually broken down over nips of moonshine shared during long hours on the riverbank or in John's funky, littered cabin when the weather was bad. He was half lit now, as usual.

"Got yo some time fo me?" he asked Jane, his foolish grin revealing a mouthful of bad teeth beneath benevolent old eyes.

"Go shush now, you funnin' me," she said, knowing that he had occasionally been seeing Lizzie, a much younger mulatto woman, for the kind of time he had in mind. "Massa Harris want yo up at the big house."

Chuckling softly, John patted her on the rear-end, then reached for his coat. Jane gave him a weary smile—of tolerant resignation rather than real affection—before walking in her slow deliberate way to the plain but comfortable dirt-floored cabin she shared with her seven children on Slave Row.

Jane had walked with a slight limp ever since a severe childhood beating by the overseer of her previous owner. She had been a slave on the Harris plantation for thirty-one of her fifty years, having been purchased at the age of 19 with her mother, brother and ten other slaves at an auction in Richmond, Virginia, in 1812—two years after Harris bought the land the plantation now occupied. If it's likely that only her children would have called Jane pretty, perhaps that's because it was they alone who saw the real, whole woman. Anyone could see how she'd assumed her departed mother Hannah's stout figure; but for Jane's children, Hannah lived still in their mother's rare and precious smile.

Having never experienced freedom, Jane had accepted slavery as her place in life until quite recently. Harris was a successful planter who maintained a patriarchal relationship with his 61 slaves, many of them born here; if you did the work asked of you, life on his plantation was tolerable most of the time. Slaves in border states like Virginia knew they had it easy compared to those on plantations in the Deep South, whose crops—cotton, rice, indigo and sugar cane—were extremely labor-intensive, and whose planters often resorted to extreme forms of punishment to get the maximum labor from their slaves. To be sold down the river at the slave auctions in Wheeling and nearby Vaocluse, or right

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off the plantation as was sometimes the case with Harris's slaves, was not only to be torn from the arms of one's family but to be consigned to a living death.

Jane's brother Tom had swum the Ohio nearly twenty years ago after severely beating the white overseer he'd caught trying to rape her. To strike a white man, of course, whatever the provocation, was one of the worst offenses a slave could commit, and Tom had fled for his life. He'd sent back word of his safe arrival in Canada with a promise to help the rest of his family escape as well, but as with Justin, no one had ever heard from him again. Though Jane often thought of her lost husband and brother and tried to keep their memories alive for her children, it was her mother for whom she still grieved.

Hannah had died with the fever winter before last, and Jane still missed the short heavyset woman with skin as dark and blue as indigo who'd always worn a pretty cloth tied round her head—who sang every morning on the way to the fields; who sang stooping over the tobacco plants she was planting, cultivating or picking; who sang on summer evenings like this when the sun was setting over the rolling wooded hills in the land of freedom across the Ohio.

Solomon Harris considered himself a humane man. He seldom chained his slaves at night, the way they did on the Henderson Plantation a few miles downriver; aside from selling a strong young buck to slave traders from time to time, he treated his slaves decently. He certainly couldn't afford to pass up the \$1,000 or more a prime male slave would bring. In 1843 when the price of potatoes was roughly \$.06 a pound and a good horse was worth about \$20.00, a northern Virginia planter might clear no more than \$500 a year from the sale of corn, tobacco and wheat alone.

That's why Harris occasionally sold a slave when cash was short, even though he didn't think much of those engaged exclusively in slave-breeding. The scenes of slaves being dragged aboard steamboats in chains to be shipped downriver to the Mississippi were sometimes more than he could stomach.

His plantation had at one time been part of George Washington's extensive holdings along the Ohio, purchased around 1770 when the 38-year-old Virginia legislator and landowner journeyed as far west as what is now Gallipolis, Ohio, in search of land. Washington had surveyed much of the same land some twenty years earlier for the first Ohio Company. In 1810, Harris, the second owner of the land after Washington, purchased a thousand fertile acres of bottomland and wooded hills at the mouth of Bull Creek in Wood County, Virginia (West Virginia since 1863), seven miles north of the little settlement of Williamstown. Across the river to the south, at the confluence of the Ohio and Muskingum Rivers, was the bustling river port of Marietta in the free state of Ohio.

The proximity of free territory was, in fact, on Harris's mind this hot, humid Sunday evening in late August, 1843. To slaves the 900-plus miles of the Ohio River, separating the slave states of Virginia and Kentucky from the Northwest Territory where slavery was banned, was like the River Jordan, which Joshua and the Children of Israel crossed into the Promised Land.

The Underground Railroad, active by now in both North and South, was well established on the Ohio side of the river. Washington County and much of southeastern Ohio were being settled by self-reliant European immigrants and New Englanders to whom the institution of slavery was an evil belying the new American nation's promise as a land of freedom. More than once Harris had had to gather men and take the ferry at Marietta into relatively hostile territory seeking fugitive slaves that belonged to him, and he hadn't

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always come back with them. He didn't relish the thought of having to go through this again, not so much from the danger involved as the risk of losing his property—to say nothing of the substantial reward he'd have to post.

Everything seemed normal enough as he made his nightly inspection tour at 8:30, just before bedtime; most of his slaves were relaxing in front of their cabins. But he suspected that somehow, as usual, they'd heard of his plans to sell Alfred and Augustus to slave traders who were due to arrive by riverboat in a few days. After his rounds he told Jeb Porter, his overseer, to check the slave quarters again before midnight.

"I don't know how they most generally find out, but they do," he grumbled.

"It's spyin' abolitionist scum tips 'em off," Porter replied, spitting to emphasize the withering scorn he shared with Harris for those among their northern neighbors who chose to meddle in affairs that were none of their business. A lanky bearded man of 40, Porter had been hired off a steamboat because of his fearsome reputation for handling slaves. Like overseers on most plantations it was his job to get the job done by any means necessary short of injuring an animal or slave, a prerogative that belonged to the master alone.

"You'd best sleep light tonight," Harris warned him. "I'll be lookin' t' you if any of my niggers swim the river tonight."

Downstream from Bull Creek the steamboat *Lady Byron*, under a Captain Sterrett of Louisville, had tied up at the bank because of the heavy white mist collecting over the river. The captain knew that in the Ohio Valley at this time of year fog could get thick enough to enshroud his deck, let alone the deceptively slow-looking current. Two old slave men sat on a clay bank above the wagon track down to Bull Creek, watching the fog come up off the river. They'd been on the plantation for more than half a century, since 1793 when President Washington himself still owned the land and they'd crossed the Appalachians with a group of slaves sent to clear bottomland along the Ohio for farming.

Marietta, the oldest organized settlement in the Northwest Territory, had already been established five years before their arrival, by 48 pioneers led by Rufus Putnam, one of the founders of the second Ohio Company. The party of boat builders, blacksmiths, carpenters and surveyors had floated down the Ohio River in flatboats from Pittsburgh.

But the two slaves had witnessed nearly everything else of historical significance in the Ohio Valley since the coming of white and black men to the American frontier: the end of the bloody Indian uprisings that had terrorized the first settlers, in 1794; Ohio's statehood in 1803; the beginning of steamboat traffic on the Ohio River around 1810; and, not least, formation of the Underground Railroad, which had begun in earnest after the American revolution and moved west with the settlement of the Northwest Territory.

It was with the help of the Underground Railroad that Jane's brother Tom had escaped across the Ohio; only the fact that they'd been sent to work on a distant part of the plantation that day had prevented the two elderly slaves from going with him. Though the time had long since passed to attempt such a daring undertaking themselves, they'd heard rumors the past couple of days, which they fervently hoped would come to nothing, of another imminent escape. It was one thing for a strong man to take his life into his own hands, risking drowning, bounty hunters and wild animals. For a mother, even a woman as strong and courageous as Jane, and her seven children to try such a thing was just crazy.

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Better that Alfred and Augustus, her two oldest boys, accept their fate rather than endangering the lives of the whole family.

The two slaves had been alerted earlier in the week to the possibility of an escape attempt, with the visit of Rail Cheadle, southern Ohio lawyer, country doctor, school teacher and textbook distributor. Unbeknownst to his planter customers throughout Virginia and Kentucky, Cheadle was an ardent abolitionist who found the idea and practice of slavery so morally repugnant he risked his life every time he ferried across the Ohio to sell books—for he came not only as a representative of eastern publishers but as an undercover agent of the Underground Railroad. In addition to a pleasant visit this week with the Harris family, Cheadle had managed to give hurried instructions to Alfred, while the slave was shoeing his horse.

It was past sundown, late enough for Jane to have prepared dinner for her family, when the five oldest children—Alfred, 25; Caroline, 23; Rachel, 22; Augustus, 16; and Thornton, 14

—returned from tying tobacco all day in the drying sheds on the far side of the plantation. Twelve-year-old Henry and his sister Fanny, 10, were sitting on a bench in front of the cabin, trying to scare each other with ghost stories.

"Ah'm hungry as a bear, Mama!" announced Alfred as soon as he walked through the door.

"Yo always starvin', boy, but you never git no meat on dem bones," Jane answered with gruff affection.

"Never you min' 'bout dat, ol' Woman—jes' git that pone on de table."

He slumped onto a crate beside a rough plank table at one end of the larger of the cabin's two rooms, while Thornton took down the battered old fiddle Master Harris had given him and bowed away exuberantly.

"Sit down and eat! Don't feel like list'nin' to no jig tonight!" Alfred commanded. Thornton, as usual, obeyed the older brother he idolized.

Caroline and Rachel helped their mother serve the corn pone and stew she'd made from a leg of lamb John had given her yesterday in the vain hope of an invitation to dinner. It was from a side of lamb he'd traded several bottles of whiskey for, a practice Harness knew of but usually ignored as long as his slave's bartering didn't seriously deplete the plantation's supply.

The two older girls were unusually quiet tonight. As Rachel dipped stew into her bowl, Jane looked at Caroline and said, "Cat got yo tongue, gals?"

"I hangin' a baby, Mama," her eldest daughter blurted out.

Jane felt her insides go queasy. It's not that the news surprised her; Caroline had been spending much of what free time she had, after her field work and cabin chores were finished, with James, a strapping young man who reminded Jane of Justin sometimes. But the timing of Caroline's pregnancy, and her announcement of it like this to the whole family, couldn't have been worse. For Jane had some very important news of her own: Tonight they were going to cross the Ohio to freedom. Not *try* to cross, she couldn't allow

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herself to think in terms of might or maybe; these were the lives of her whole family she was risking.

Though Master Harris was a more lenient man than Jane's previous master had been, there was nothing that upset him more than a runaway slave. Once when a black boy named Sam had run off and got caught Harris had branded his forehead with a big "R", then sold him down the river. Jane could still smell the seared flesh and hear his screams. And this wasn't one slave Jane would be depriving Harris of but eight!

Yet it wasn't just her enraged master that concerned her, or the bounty hunters who'd come after them drawn by his big reward. In 1843 the virgin forests of the Northwest Territory were still full of wolves, bears, bobcats and panthers (often pronounced "painters" in this part of the country.) Although then as now these animals seldom attacked humans unless provoked or in defense of their young, like most slaves Jane had been sheltered from the wilderness all her life. And like the typical planter Harris found it advantageous to stoke his slaves' superstitions and fears of wild animals to make escape attempts appear as dangerous as possible. He was a good storyteller, especially when his tongue was well lubricated with moonshine. And his tall tales of runaway slaves being torn to pieces by wolves and bears when they foolishly ventured into the wilderness beyond the Ohio were even more effective when they came second-hand from Harris's drinking buddy, John.

But the alternative to the family's escape was the certain loss of Jane's two eldest sons to plantations in the Deep South. John, bless his soul, had warned her the Master intended to sell Alfred and Augustus when the tobacco was all cut and hung in the sheds. From what Harris had unwisely let slip a few days ago, there would be nearly fifty slaves for sale, from as far away as Clarksburg, at the slave auction next week at Vaucluse: a once thriving Virginia riverport a few miles upstream from Bull Creek which no longer exists.

Ever since John had shared this grim news with her—after passing the information on to the Underground Railroad— Jane had been laying a few things aside to take with them. When the girls had noticed and asked questions, she put them off in her stern maternal way. Then yesterday afternoon and this evening she'd baked cornbread for their trip. Well, Caroline's pregnancy probably wasn't far enough along to pose a real problem for them; it was just one more life in Jane's hands.

The fog continued to roll in, and by ten o'clock visibility had diminished to just a few feet. Around midnight, Jane and her family wrapped the few things they were taking with them in clean rags and crept from their cabin into the stifling, nearly subaqueous night air. Holding hands to stay together, they slipped quietly down to the mouth of Bull Creek where Josephus "the Ferryman", a slave from the nearby Box Plantation in Williamstown, VA, awaited them.

Josephus must have felt his mission in life was to work for the Underground Railroad; although he himself remained a slave until Emancipation, he spent some 50 years rowing perhaps as many as a thousand fleeing slaves across the Ohio to freedom. Tonight his large rowboat bobbed between the exposed roots of a large sycamore leaning out over the river, while three other Harris slaves—Hershel, James and Caesar—who were also attempting to escape, waited impatiently on the bank.

When Jane and her children arrived, she may have had second thoughts about going through with their plan. Not only hadn't she been told that her family would be joined by other passengers, but the river was literally invisible in the fog. The fugitives

could smell its pungent, fishy odor and hear it lapping against the bank, slapping the sides of the boat, but they could barely make out one another or the bobbing rowboat itself. How could they possibly make it to the other side, nearly half a mile away? How would they know they were even heading in the right direction?

"How we all gwine fit?" she hissed at Josephus. "No one done tol' me there'd be other folks!"

"We makin' two trips tonight," Josephus whispered back huskily, "you and yo chillun first—git in now, quiet's you can. Hershel, you he'p 'em so's they don't rock the boat."

But the family had no sooner begun boarding and stowing their meager baggage than a sudden disturbance in the slave quarters reached them. Harris's overseer had discovered their absence!

"Git in! Git in!" rasped Josephus. "We all gwine now!"

They could hear men shouting, dogs barking and snarling. Leaving most of their belongings behind, Jane and her children piled into the rowboat, assisted then followed by the three men.

Josephus had made the crossing to Reno, a village north of Marietta directly opposite the plantation, many times but perhaps never before in an impenetrable fog in so dangerously overloaded a boat. It was already taking on water. Behind them, approaching the river, they could hear the muffled, urgent voices of Harris and Jeb Porter under the keening of the plantation's hounds. Josephus pulled on the oars with all the strength in his lean work-hardened body; the fugitives felt themselves leaving the near riverbank—and the plantation where all of them had lived their entire lives—behind. They sensed themselves gradually entering the strong steady current of the main channel.

And now the fog which had appeared, and in fact remained, a threat to them was their protector as well. Harris, Porter and the dogs had reached the water but they could see no sign of the rowboat wallowing toward the middle of the Ohio. Nor did the Ferryman, a strong and skillful rower, reveal their location by allowing his oars to clash against the oarlocks.

"*Come back here, you fool niggers, before you all drown!*" shouted Harris.

Though somewhat muffled by the fog, the Master's furious disembodied voice sounded closer than it was because of his invisibility. A moment later the sudden loud report from his flintlock rifle nearly swamped them as the slaves all ducked reflexively.

"Ohh, *now* we in trouble!" Rachel moaned softly.

"Don't you worry none, Missy," Hershel reassured her. "Massa wouldn't aim to hit us if he could see us—we too valu'ble to shoot."

Although rowing blind, Josephus knew the Ohio's current to be a reliable guide. The moment he pointed the rowboat's nose either up- or downstream, the current magnified the deviation and tried to swing the boat around: clockwise or counter-clockwise, respectively. At Josephus' urgent order, his passengers bailed with their hats or hands as best they could.

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No one spoke another word and neither of the two younger children so much as whimpered; in fact 10-year-old Fanny was such a strong-willed little tomboy she might very well have been the *last* to give them away. Miraculously, a little less than thirty minutes from the time they left the Virginia side of the river they were scrambling onto freedom's shore.

"What we do now, Mama?" asked Henry in a loud whisper. Called "Jane's Shadow" by some of his siblings and others on the plantation because he was seldom far from her side, Henry was always asking questions, prompted by a vivid imagination and unusually deep thinking for a boy his age. When Jane was at the big house Henry was always there with her; he'd learned to read and write from the Harris children—as had Jane herself by eavesdropping on their lessons and cleverly manipulating the children.

"Shush, boy, you want massa t' ketch us?" Jane had no immediate answer to his question. There was no sign of the lantern David Putnam, Jr., their conductor, was supposed to be holding up as a signal to mark the beginning of their journey on the Underground Railroad. They didn't dare call out, for fear not only of bounty hunters but any venal citizen interested in what was bound to be a big reward for 11 escaped slaves.

"Let's split up," whispered Caesar. "Me an' James an' Hershel'll walk upstream; Jane, y'all head toward Marietta. Whoever runs into Massa Putnam first can go an' fetch the others."

"That sound good t' me, Mama," said Alfred. Jane agreed; the two groups parted silently in the fog.

John had given Hershel a pint bottle of liquid courage—some of the Master's own moonshine—and he and his companions took a quick swig to celebrate their successful escape. Before long, however, as they made their way stealthily along the riverbank with no sign of a lantern or their conductor, the combination of fog and white lightning began to disorient them. Caesar, in fact, disappeared—never to be heard from again.

Hershel and James decided to strike out on their own for the Little Muskingum, a much smaller tributary than its namesake downstream. They'd both been on this side of the Ohio before and knew the way, and they had been told that the Little Muskingum pointed the way to the Jewett Palmer Station on the easternmost of the three main lines of the Underground Railroad in Washington County.

(Although it's natural to imagine this famous freedom line as a series of tunnels, "Underground Railroad" usually refers to a covert *operation*, with political, religious and moral objectives, rather than the actual routes fugitive slaves followed—which were above ground in any case. "Stations", the homes of abolitionists acting as station managers, were the Underground Railroad's communications centers. Runaway slaves were seldom hidden there; the stations were too well known and closely watched by those whom abolitionists contemptuously called "lick-spittle", hoping to collect a reward for reporting or capturing escaped slaves. Fugitives were concealed in the hidden chambers of safe houses, in caves, thickets and haylofts.

(The principal Ohio station, upon which a number of major and branch lines converged northward from the Ohio River, was in Oberlin, about 10 miles from Lake Erie, southwest of Cleveland. The ultimate destination might be Canada; a northern city or some local, usually black, community in rural Ohio, where the runaways would try to cover their tracks and begin to put down roots; or, with forged freedom papers, the black African colony of Liberia, established on the west coast of Africa in 1822 by the American Colonization Society as a new homeland for freed slaves—or as a devious scheme to send

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black Africans back where they came from, depending on which historical account you believe.)

In the meantime, a short distance downstream from where the two parties had separated, Henry was the first to spot David Putnam, Jr.'s, welcome lantern glowing dimly in the fog.

"Dere's da light! I see da light, Mama!" he whispered, pointing in excitement.

A few seconds later the abolitionist's eyes widened when he saw the number, and youth, of the party now in his care.

"There be three more of us on upstream a ways," Jane advised him breathlessly.

"Well, we can't look for them now," replied Putnam, dousing the lantern, "we're behind schedule as it is. I'm sure I wasn't the only one who heard that gunshot earlier either. If we don't overtake them on the way to the wagon, I'll send someone to look for them. Now, I want you all to take hands, and...bee...qui-et."

In single file, he led the family on a dizzying trip through the fog. A quarter of a mile away, Stephen Quixote waited nervously on a canvas-covered wagon pulled by a team of strong-looking draft horses. The somnolent pair stood impassively in the traces, their only movement the rhythmic flicking of tails to ward off the night's mosquitoes.

"Women in the wagon, men and boys walk behind," said Putnam, man of few words when acting as conductor. Jane and her three daughters clambered in beneath the canvas.

"Yo on mah leg, Fanny!" complained Rachel, the middle sister.

"Well then move!" Fanny hissed back.

"I can't breathe in here, Mama," Rachel whimpered.

"Dis de las' time ahm tellin' you, girls!" Jane whispered angrily. "Yo big gapes git us caught, den what? We got a long trip ahead an' we gwine be quiet the whole time, you hear?"

Quixote gave the reins a shake and, with the four brothers following on foot, they set off for the Jewett Palmer farm on the first of what would be many harrowing wagon rides if they were to reach Canada safely. For the first time tonight the fugitives allowed themselves a momentary sense of relief.

It didn't last long, however, especially for the younger children, because this was virgin wilderness through which they were traveling, on a narrow trail little more than a cowpath, overhung with dense vegetation. The oppressive night was full of the sounds of insects, tree frogs and, occasionally, wild animals; but as with city slickers, what these lifelong plantation dwellers *couldn't* hear but only imagine was even scarier. In addition to four-legged predators, armed bounty hunters might burst from the dark glowering forest at any time. Perhaps it was just as well that the fog still surrounded them in its clammy blindfold.

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About a mile from its mouth at the Ohio, the Little Muskingum makes an acute bend, doubling back on itself for several hundred yards, then straightening for half a mile to a cluster of houses known as Cornerville. Anyone hacking his way through dense underbrush along the meandering stream itself, rather than following the wagon track Jane and her family were on, would be hopelessly behind schedule by now, as indeed James and Hershel were. But their situation was even worse than that, for they were unaware that the road to Jewett Palmer's prosperous 150-acre farm left the Little Muskingum at Cornerville to run roughly due north to the community of Germantown in Liberty Township. By now it was growing lighter, the fog had begun to lift, and the two slaves were a long way from the Jewett Palmer Station.

Exhausted, probably hung over and scared, James and Hershel saw the shape of a building looming up out of the fog in front of them. But if they had visions of reaching safety at last, they had only a moment to savor them. The faint bellowing of Harris' hounds on their fresh trail sent them running for what proved to be a barn. Frantically, they slipped in through a door, scrambled up the ladder to the hayloft, and buried themselves in sweet-smelling clover.

For several minutes that must have seemed much longer to them all they could do was lie there listening to the dogs drawing closer. Their barking had awakened the family whose farm this was—if they weren't already lingering over breakfast, waiting for the fog to lift. Before long the whole family was milling around in the barn below, their voices soon drowned out by the commotion of the excited dogs and the shouts of Harris and his men. Minutes later, James and Hershel were descending the shaky ladder only a few feet from the barrel of Harris's shotgun.

The farmer was neither an abolitionist nor a sympathizer of slavery. Had he found the fugitives in time, he might have helped them; as it was all he could do was delay the inevitable.

"Hold on here!" he said. "You can't just come onto a man's property and be orderin' people around with guns pointed at 'em, I don't care what color their skin is. We'll get the sheriff before you leave here with these men. Let him decide what t' do."

With one of the farmer's sons standing by with a shotgun of his own, Harris thought twice about defying him. He decided instead to send two of his men for the sheriff, then chained his two slaves and began to question them.

"Where's the others?" he wanted to know first of all. "Which way are they headin'? Where'd you get the boat? Was someone other'n you niggers rowin' it?" Neither James nor Hershel said a word. Harris couldn't very well beat any answers out of them here, but one way or another he expected to find out where Jane and her family were headed.

At just about this time they were arriving on schedule at the Jewett Palmer Station. Mrs. Palmer, an expert by now in dispensing hearty, nourishing meals under battlefield-like conditions, met them.

"Land sakes, you folks look exhausted—and I'll bet you're hungry too. Food's on its way, then we have to get you hid before daylight."

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After wolfing down a big meal of ham and eggs with thick slabs of bread, the physically and emotionally spent family was dispersed to hideouts around the property to rest during daylight. Most of Palmer's neighbors knew what went on at the farm, they just didn't know when. Some of them would gladly have turned in the fugitive family for what Harris later announced as a \$450 reward; with labor worth less than a dollar a day, it represented more than a year's income for many local farmers.

The wagon was hidden in Palmer's spacious barn, and Stephen Quixote went to sleep in the hay. Jane and Caroline bedded down in a grove a short distance from the house; Rachel, Fanny and Henry were hidden in a thicket near their mother. The three older boys hid out in a rock crevice in a steep bank overlooking the house. Palmer made it a point to work around the farm in plain view of passersby, partly to paint a business-as-usual picture and partly to keep an eye out for bounty hunters.

About two p.m. an abolitionist named Julius Demming rode up on a well-lathered horse to report what had happened to James and Hershel.

"They caught two runaways from the Harris Plantation out at Reno this morning," he told Palmer, after watering his horse. "Sheriff took 'em to the county courthouse, and Judge Cotton had to let Harris take 'em back to Virginia. Talk is that Harris is after these folks here too. Putnam told me to ride out here and let you know."

"Them slavers don't know when to quit, do they, Jul? Well, we'll have the ones that's here on their way after dark. Give your horse a rest and come on up to the house for some coffee."

Demming filled the Palmers in on what had taken place in and around the Washington County Courthouse that morning. No one knew anything of Caesar, the missing escapee, but it was feared he had suffered misfortune of some kind. Palmer, who hated the thought of losing a single slave, found consolation in the safe arrival of Jane's family at his station. Both men knew the rough treatment awaiting the two who had been caught. Demming returned to David Putnam, Jr., at his home in the Harmar section of Marietta with the good news that Jane and her family were resting and would be departing at dark.

In the meantime, Jane tried to console her eldest daughter, who was heartbroken at the prospect of never again seeing the father of her unborn child. Caroline had hurried to him the night before, frantic with the last-minute news of her family's plan to escape. But James, as distraught as Caroline, had refused to desert his ailing mother. "Why you tellin' me this *now*?" he'd demanded of her, his handsome face disfigured by pain and a sense of betrayal.

"Mama only done tol' us, Jame!" Caroline had pleaded with him. "*Please*—yo mama don' need you like me an' yo baby's gwin' to!" In the end Alfred had practically had to drag his sister away with him.

"You should a tol' us, Mama," Caroline sobbed now in a choked whisper, as Jane huddled over her, trying both to comfort and quiet her daughter. "Jus' like me, my baby's never gonna know its daddy."

"No! *Not* like you, Care'line," Jane replied in a fierce whisper. "Your baby's gwin grow up *free*, girl! If'n yo Jame be the man you think he is, he'll fin' a way too. We'll get word to him somehow."

Escape of Jane

Arriving back at the plantation early that afternoon, Harris chained James and Hershel in the shed that served as a jail. They refused to talk. He was reluctant to try to flog the information out of them, knowing that with news of the slaves' capture, the Washington County operatives had likely changed their plans by now anyway. He rounded up twenty or so neighbors, promising them pay and a split of the reward when they captured the fugitives still at large.

An informant had reported seeing some fugitive slaves a month earlier at the Philip Severance farm in Middleburg, an abolitionist stronghold in northern Washington County. (Ohio's first county was much larger then; Middleburg is now in Noble County). That's where Harris intended to look first. Leaving his son William in charge of the plantation and with provisions sufficient for three or four days, the party left late in the afternoon. Harris, as usual, was mounted on the big bay stallion he'd purchased at a handsome price from a Kentucky thoroughbred farm. He collected a whopping \$20 stud fee every time he stood the stallion, which could outrun any other horse in the area.

The Virginians rode south from Bull Creek and took the ferry to Marietta. It would be dark soon and Harris had already decided to give his vigilantes a night on the town. He would lay over at an inn on Ohio Street; the others could spend the night at the livery stable. Ohio Street was notorious for its sporting life. Several riverboats a day docked at the levee, disgorging a constant stream of rough men looking for a good time. The many brothels in this part of town were full of fancy women determined to give it to them.

The brothel across the street from the inn where Harris was staying boasted a woman to fill any man's needs, including beautiful Creoles from New Orleans. Though the slaveowner was content to amuse himself with drink and observation, he treated his posse to whiskey and women. After all, he expected to be repaid in full with the capture of his runaway slaves. His overseer finally called a halt to the party around midnight.

Rising early the next morning, Harris ate a hearty breakfast, then went to the livery stable to rouse his men. Most were hung over but they wasted little time in saddling their mounts; breakfast was whatever they'd packed for themselves and bread supplied by the plantation—eaten as they rode out of town. On their way up Third Street heading north they passed an old black man named Jeb Coursey, who worked for the city. He was driving a team of mules hooked to a large empty wagon which by the end of the day would be full of horse droppings gathered from the city streets.

"Get them damn mules outa the way!" Harris yelled, forcing Coursey off the road.

"Goddamn niggers this side a the river think they can do anything they please," his overseer added.

Coursey wisely ignored the provocation, but as soon as the Virginians had passed he whipped the mules into a vigorous trot all the way to town, where he promptly reported what he'd seen to David Putnam, Jr. The news alarmed the abolitionist, and after consulting with his father they agreed that while it was too late to warn the fugitives, word should be sent out to station managers to the north that the slaves were under pursuit.

By now Jane and her family, after their second night on the road, were asleep in the hayloft of a barn belonging to the Reverend Joseph Markey at the Stafford Station, just across the Washington County line in Monroe County. Joseph's son Jonas had been dispatched to William Steel's home in Stafford to inform the respected head of the

Abolitionist movement in southern Ohio of the latest passengers' arrival. From here Jonas was sent on to station manager Philip Severance in Middleburg where Howard and Rose Neale, a young fugitive couple from farther south in Virginia, were in hiding. Rose had given birth on the Severance farm just a few days earlier. The small group they'd been traveling with had moved on while the Neales stayed behind so mother and baby could gain strength for the rest of their journey.

Jonas was in no hurry, having to cover only about six miles. Riding a little spotted Indian pony with an easy ground-covering gait, he sat back in the saddle and let it take him along a trail through virgin hardwood timber, broken by the occasional farmstead, to the Severance farm. He arrived just in time for lunch. Mrs. Severance, an attractive woman of generous proportions, was part of the large German contingent in southeastern Ohio, and her meals were always ample.

"Sit down with us, Jonas. There's *wurst* and *apfelstrudel* on the table. Can I get you a glass of cider?"

"Thank you, Miz Severance, that sure would be welcome. It's hot out there this morning." He hung his sweat-stained hat on the back of an empty chair and mopped his forehead with a handkerchief before sitting down at the table, which was heavily laden with platters of sweet corn and fresh vegetables from the garden as well as the German fare.

Between mouthfuls, and glances at the Severances' only daughter Mathilda, a fetching likeness of her mother who would one day be his wife, Jonas conversed with Philip about this year's corn crop, the latest steamboat disaster on the Muskingum (the boilers on these stern- and sidewheelers blew up with unnerving frequency and loss of life), and other matters of interest to local farmers of the time.

The two men had finished lunch and were smoking in the shade of the wide front porch when Harris's band of Virginians, enveloped in a thick cloud of dust, rounded a curve in the narrow dirt road which ended at the farm. The big hunting hound that had been lying between the two men stood up and growled deeply, held on the porch by his master's command.

Philip Severance was a hard, lean man with the sharp eyes of the gun-fighter he might have become had he grown up some 1,500 miles farther west. Though he had married Wilhemina Schaffer and settled into a steady life of farming instead, not many men of any size would tackle Philip Severance one on one. He sent his daughter out the back way to warn the young couple hidden in the top part of his tobacco drying shed of the unexpected visit; an outburst from their newborn could spell disaster for everyone.

Set back about fifty feet from the road, the Severance house was surrounded by a white picket fence and well-tended lawn. Solomon Harris rode right up to the fence on his big bay horse and for a long time sat there looking over all of the farm he could see. Even at 60, well over six feet tall, Harris was a commanding figure in his dusty but well-tailored black suit. He had steel blue eyes that could look right through a man and the practiced air of command that was the mark of a slave-master; he was accustomed to being obeyed by white and black men alike. At first no one said a word. The dust settled around the riders as the lathered, sweating horses pranced and chewed on their bits. Then Harris looked Philip Severance right in the eyes; Severance stared silently back at him with the same cool intensity.

"Seen any niggers about?" Harris asked in a deep raspy voice.

Escape of Jane

Severance didn't answer, but his wife Wilhemina stepped through the door and replied, "Nein—no, we haven't. But could I offer you and your men some nice cool cider?"

"No thanks," said Harris, who didn't much care for Germans, "I'm tracking some of my niggers that run off. I heard you been hidin' niggers here—believe we'll be searchin' the place."

"That won't be necessary," said Severance, tensing. At this the dog, which had been quivering at his side with a sustained low growl ever since the Virginians rode up, suddenly bounded from the porch toward the fence. The big bay reared, nearly unseating Harris, who had to grab his horse by the neck to keep from falling. This spooked most of the other animals, and the Severances and Jonas Markey were treated to a 10-second rodeo that soon had Jonas struggling to keep from laughing aloud.

Though he quickly regained control of his mount, Harris had lost the advantage. Like Hershel and James the day before, he found himself looking down the barrel of Severance's 10-gauge.

"We'll be leavin' now," Harris growled, "but if I don't find them niggers by nightfall, I'll be back—and that goddamned dog will be the first thing I shoot." He wheeled the stallion around and galloped back down the road they'd just come up, with the other riders strung out in a line behind. Severance's bellowed command kept the furiously barking dog from chasing after them.

"Better go for some reinforcements, Jonas," he said.

Markey started off in the opposite direction from the Virginians, intending to circle around past his own house on his return to the Steel home in Stafford, spreading the word to friends along the way. When Steel heard the news he sent Jonas and a few others off in different directions to round up as many neighbors as possible with instructions to meet at Severance's before dark.

Plans to move the fugitives that night, of course, were postponed. After they'd eaten their evening meal, Jane and her daughters were hidden in a cave a quarter of a mile from the Markey house, and her sons were taken to a heavily wooded part of the farm where trees had been felled earlier in the summer by a freak windstorm that some claimed had been a small tornado. The virgin timber, which would eventually be cut into lumber, would have made an excellent hiding place except for one unforeseen circumstance: its proximity to where the Virginians themselves would make camp that night.

In the meantime, as darkness fell, some forty armed men began assembling at the Severance farm. They stayed up all night, drinking apple cider and sassafras tea by the gallon, but Harris and his men never returned. Convinced the fugitives were still somewhere in the area, the slaveowner had decided to rest for the night and continue the search first thing the next morning. His property meant a lot more to him than getting even or saving face.

Early the next morning when Harris crawled from his bedroll, his overseer gave him a steaming cup of coffee to cut the heavy damp chill in the air. "Where the hell is everybody?" Harris grunted, noticing that a few of the men were missing.

"Just huntin' us some meat for breakfast," Jeb Porter replied.

"Goddamnit, I don't want any shootin'!"

"You don't think the niggers is somewhere nearby do you?" asked Porter in surprise.

"I don't know where they are, but we sure as well won't improve our chances by lettin' 'em know we're here. Which way did the men go?" His overseer gestured vaguely into the forest. Cursing, Harris threw the rest of his coffee away and yelled to the men still at the campsite. "Fan out and find those hunters! I don't want a single shot fired!"

In the bottom of a draw not far away, a number of giant hardwood trees lay uprooted in a wide swath, toppled by some unimaginable force. From the ridgeline above, between the fallen trees and the Virginians' campsite, a hunter took aim at a red squirrel high in the boughs of a 300-year-old white oak. Having eaten just bread and bacon the day before, he was determined to make his shot count. He squeezed the trigger...and a few birds exploded from neighboring trees. The squirrel plummeted into the tangle of fallen timber, not twenty feet from Jane's son Henry, who like his three older brothers had just been awakened by the gunshot.

The man who'd fired it was already sliding down the hillside toward them for his breakfast. The brothers held an urgent whispered conference. They couldn't see the hunter to identify him, but he was sure to spot them where they lay on blankets, concealed amongst broken limbs and branches between two massive trunks—and likely to hear them if they tried to sneak away.

"I can take 'im!" said Augustus. The strongest of the brothers, he'd been doing a man's work since the age of 12. He'd often told his mother he wanted to be a riverboat hand, but Jane had always forbidden him even to mention such a thing to Master Harris.

"No—there may be others with him!" Alfred whispered back.

The family's escape attempt would probably have ended right here had it not been for Solomon Harris's dictatorial ways. Alerted to the hunter's location by the gunshot, and enraged by it, he appeared on the ridge in time to see the offender sliding into the tree-strewn ravine after his prey.

"*Did you fire that shot?!*" he roared.

"...Who—me?" the hunter replied, stopped in the middle of his steep descent. "It weren't me—I *heard* one though."

"Get the hell up here!"

Reluctantly leaving his squirrel behind, the man climbed sheepishly back up the heavily wooded slope as others gathered along the ridge. Harris grabbed hold of the hunter's rifle the moment he reached the top, sniffed the end of its warm barrel and knew at once that it had just been fired.

"You done forfeited your share of the reward," he said, slamming the gun back into the humbled man's hands with a withering look. "If there *is* one, now that we've told the niggers we're here. Let this be a lesson to the rest of you!" he announced. "You're bein' paid for just one thing: to find them niggers and take 'em back with us!"

Escape of Jane

Later that morning when the Virginians rode in from the south, the village of Stafford was quiet—too quiet, Harris suspected. He eyed each house carefully as they rode past, with a feeling that his slaves were hiding right here in town. Passing the home of William Steel, he saw a curtain move downstairs and realized he and his men were being watched. A band of armed riders was bound to draw attention, but Harris had heard rumors of secret chambers in the Steel house. On impulse he reined his horse around, dismounted and strode up to the door.

Steel, a Scottish immigrant, was tired and short of patience. He knew as soon as he opened the door that the man who'd been knocking peremptorily was Solomon Harris, the reason he'd been up all night at the Severance farm.

"And what may I do for ye, Sir?" he said, with a friendliness he certainly didn't feel.

Somewhat disarmed by the courteous greeting, Harris introduced himself and said, "I am inquiring if you've seen some niggers wanderin' these parts. I'm certain they're in the area."

"You surely must be mistaken, Sir," Steel replied, affecting amazement. "There are no such people hereabout, I have never seen such a person as that."

Aware now that he was being mocked, Harris frowned and gestured to his posse. "Then you won't mind if we search your place."

"Not at all, Sir," said Steel—"but first you must attend to a small detail for me."

"And what might that be?" asked Harris suspiciously.

"I'd like you to walk across the street to the funeral parlor and make your final arrangements. For when you search my home and find no 'niggers' here, you'll require its services."

Harris glanced around to see that other men, none of whom appeared the least bit friendly, had materialized between buildings on both sides of the street. Without another word he walked back to his horse, swung into the saddle and led his men out of town, never to return to the peaceful community of Stafford again. The next day, he and his hired riders returned to Virginia without their slaves. He had "Wanted" posters printed up at once, however, offering a reward of \$450 for the return of the fugitives to his Wood County plantation: \$100 for Alfred, \$50 for each of the others.

Harris's departure didn't end the ordeal for Jane and her family, however. They remained at the Markey farm another day while the Virginians were still in the area, then that night Jonas Markey went to the woods where the boys were hiding and hooted softly like an owl three times: the signal that all was clear. An hour later the family was reunited, joined now by the young Neale couple and their baby from the Severance farm.

"Thankee kindly!" said Jane to the Markeys, with tears in her eyes. "Weuns'll neber forget what y'all done for us."

Escape of Jane

"We only did what was right, Jane," replied Mrs. Markey. We'll pray for you and your family—and for you young folks too," she promised the Neales. "Thank the Lord your little baby will never know what it's like to be a slave."

"Praise God!" said Jane in a quiet but fervent voice.

"Amen," added the younger parents almost simultaneously.

With a warm meal in their stomachs, feeling rested and relieved to be on the road again, the women climbed into the wagon with the baby, while the men and children stretched their legs.

Jonas was driving this time. Alfred, armed with a pitchfork, and Augustus, carrying a club he'd made from a hickory limb while they were hiding out, strode along in front of the team of horses. The moon was nearly full in a cloudless sky, bathing the landscape in more light than station managers preferred for night travel. But spies had confirmed that Harris's men had taken the ferry back to Virginia late that afternoon, and it had been decided that the greater risk was for the passengers to tarry any longer in Stafford. Somewhere below the ridge road to the Summerfield station, whippoorwills called mournfully to one another; in the distance a fox yelped; a nocturnal chorus of katydids, tree crickets and, where there was water, tree frogs thrummed in the night.

Suddenly the horses stopped in their tracks. Snorting, jerking their heads, they strained against the reins, threatening to bolt. Jonas touched the small single-shot pistol in his pocket to reassure himself it was there, then redoubled his efforts to keep his two strong horses under control. Everyone peered into the darkness to see what had spooked them.

Soon they could make out what was either a large dog or, less likely, a wolf staggering unsteadily toward them on the moonlit road, uttering a blood-curdling sound between a growl and a gurgle as if in great pain. It was obviously rabid. In 1843, some 40 years before Louis Pasteur developed his successful vaccine against rabies, a mad dog was arguably the most dangerous animal in the world. It was likely to attack at any moment, and its bite was invariably lethal: one reason nearly every wagon on the road carried a pitchfork.

Alfred, who had encountered mad dogs before, was thankful for the one in his hands and for the moonlight. "Look like he fixin' t' charge, Gus. Lemme take 'im on first, then you know what t' do with that club."

When the dog sprang, Alfred met it squarely with the tines of the pitchfork, driving them deep into the suffering beast's neck and chest. He didn't have to say another word to Augustus. Once the drooling, snarling animal was immobilized the younger boy rushed in to beat it savagely in the head until its contorted, writhing body lay still at last.

Jonas regained control of the trembling horses and the fugitives set off again into the night. A few hours later the wagon reached the station at Summerfield, where Richard, Thomas and William Horton, William Capell, and John Lemmax were principal officers on the Underground Railroad. All had brought their families to Noble County from Ireland. Also among the early population of this area were a number of pro-slavery descendants of families from Virginia. Since in their bitter opposition to abolition they would help return fugitive slaves to their masters, station masters on the Underground Railroad had to be especially careful in this part of the county.

Escape of Jane

A dug-out cellar beneath the smaller of William Horton's two barns was used to hide slaves in Summerfield. It was damp and musty but no one complained. The Neales and Jane's family were given food and water, then told to sleep until darkness when they would be taken to Guinea, an all-black community in Belmont County about 15 miles away. Guinea was really the first station where the runaways would be able to relax; officials of the freedom line considered it a haven where bounty hunters dared not venture.

But the passengers were still a night's journey from Guinea. Late that morning at the general store in Carlisle, a village southwest of Summerfield, a pro-slavery opportunist named Luther Brandon had heard news of their travel through the area and the rumor of a substantial reward. He decided to ride up to Summerfield and take a look around. Everyone knew the Hortons were active in the Underground Railroad, and Brandon decided to put William's farm under surveillance first. He approached as close as he dared on horseback, then, tying his mount to a tree with sufficient slack in the reins for it to graze, hiked through the woods to a knoll overlooking Horton's house, barns and numerous outbuildings.

He hadn't been there long before spying the young mother with her baby walk quickly from the house to the smaller of the two barns and disappear inside. Although he'd guessed right, Brandon knew he couldn't capture the slaves by himself—he'd already lost a fight to the biggest Horton brother, Thomas—and as it was late afternoon by now, he didn't have time to go for reinforcements. His best alternative was to wait until nightfall and see which way the runaways were headed, then ride for help to one of the pro-slavery farms in the area and try to head them off before they reached their destination in the morning.

He watched Jonas Markey drive off in a wagon; no doubt this was how the fugitives had arrived. What he didn't count on was that on his return to Summerfield Jonas would spot Brandon's horse tethered well off the road in the woods. Had the sound of the wagon not prompted the animal to whinny, Jonas would probably never have spotted it. As it was, he got down to investigate and, recognizing the horse as Brandon's, realized at once why it was here. He removed the saddle and bridle and turned the horse loose; it immediately headed off toward Carlisle and home.

In the meantime, as Brandon watched from his hiding place, he saw first the men, then the women, sneak from the barn to relieve themselves in the bushes. Soon afterwards, their evening meal was brought to them in a large picnic basket. The rumors were right: there were a number of slaves in the barn; a large reward would be his to share if they could be captured.

Brandon was hidden in trees near the road when Thomas Horton's wagon left the farm and turned east toward Guinea. He'd guessed this was their destination but he hadn't been certain, nor had he known whether the wagon would be escorted. It wasn't—and he had time now to round up a few men to intercept the fugitives somewhere this side of Guinea. He ran for his horse.

While Luther Brandon was limping back to Carlisle, shifting the weight of his saddle and bridle from one aching shoulder to the other, most of Jane's pain arose from within. Long dulled by time and familiarity, the old anguish of loss—her parents, her husband, her brother, her grandmother—had been awakened in her family's flight through these dark sultry August nights.

Escape of Jane

Fear for her children's safety had roused Jane from the lifelong depression with which slavery held the heart in chains. And this enforced idleness that she'd never experienced before, even in sickness and childbirth—sleeping by day (or trying to) and lying night after night on a hard, jolting wagonbed beneath the stifling canvas cover which at once shielded and suffocated Jane and her daughters—gave her too much time to remember and grieve.

Of course, the demands of motherhood kept pulling her from her dark thoughts... and there was something else as well: the faint glimmer of a feeling utterly new and foreign to her. It took Jane some time to identify this mood or intuition or sensation even when it had finally breached her threshold of perception, like the imperceptibly rising waters of a flood. Then one night her mind acknowledged what her heart had been telling her: this was *freedom* she was feeling, for the first time in her life.

Not only was she seeing an unfamiliar landscape, new people and places for the first time in more than 30 years, but in a sense that was never true before, the images her eyes hungrily lingered on were *hers*, they *belonged* to her. The very air she breathed, the wind in her face were hers. And she could go—she was *free* to go—wherever the wind took her. The thought of this was both exhilarating and unnerving, even terrifying if she followed it too far. Then she had to draw herself up and focus on the family's immediate destination: Canada, a land even freer than Ohio, where even the bounty hunters would no longer be able to grab her children and drag them back into slavery.

From Guinea the fugitives journeyed to the Judge Collins farm west of Barnesville, an Ohio community founded by Quakers. At the foot of Mt. Ephriam, the last big hill they'd have to negotiate on their trip, Jane and her daughters got out and climbed beside the wagon. Even Aaron, their conductor, drove his team of horses up the steep winding grade from the ground.

An Underground Railroad crossroads where fugitives from the south and east were gathered before being sent northward to Oberlin, Barnesville had been involved in the movement from the beginning. Quakers often bought young slaves at the Wheeling auction, taught them to read and write, then gave them their freedom papers—as had Collins himself, a federal judge who traveled to Columbus for two weeks of court proceedings every three months.

The round of grueling nights with days spent in fitful slumber wore on, as the fugitives passed successively through the Freeport, Ulrichville, Midvale-Barnhill, Zoar, Canton, Canal Fulton, and Lagrange stations. They all began to seem alike to Jane and her children: kind people, good and plentiful food, hideouts ranging from secret chambers with clean comfortable bedding on the floor to caves and dank cellars. Jane developed a nagging cough and shivered with the ague at night. The fear which never left them had become augmented by tedium and fatigue.

Finally, on September 17, they were met on the shore of Lake Erie by Josiah Henson, a black man in his early 60s whom some historians believe was the model for Uncle Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe's incendiary novel. Thirteen years earlier, when he had been tricked out of his freedom after a lifetime of loyal servitude to three brutal and dissolute masters, Henson had fled from slavery with his wife and family. With a group of followers he'd founded Dawn, a struggling though self-supporting black community to which Jane's and the Neale family were headed now.

Escape of Jane

Jane introduced herself and her children to Henson, then turned to the young couple and their baby. "Dis chile name Freedom cause she bo'n on the freedom trail," she said proudly.

Josiah was pleased by Jane's forward manner. "Good, Good! Jest cross that Lake Erie y'all gonna be free, sho 'nough."

None of the fugitives had ever seen so much water. The Ohio River had been wide enough to divide slave state from free, but they could see across it. This sprawling blue boundary line was deeply reassuring. Jane found it possible to believe that her family would be safe on the other side of such an immense body of water.

"Git on board now," Henson urged his gaping and exhausted party, "'fore some bow'ney hunter come along at the last minute and take you-uns back. You'll see all a that lake you wants from the boat."

At this, Alfred grabbed his mother by the arm and danced her all the way up the gangplank of the small steamboat. The captain, a Scotsman, bellowed, "Welcome ye free souls! Ye be on your way home now!"

The gangplank was quickly raised, mooring lines cast off, and the sternwheel began to slice through the placid surface of the lake, transforming the turbid waters into a lacy white veil which spilled over its powerful wooden paddles.

Feeling the tears come, Jane breathed a deep sigh. As the boat swung around into open water and a breeze washed against her face, it felt as if some heavy bird—much larger than the grey and white gulls squawking around the boat—had just lifted from her shoulders. An incredible lightness flowed into her bosom; she felt her knees buckle and staggered to maintain her balance. She'd have fallen if Alfred hadn't been there to hold her up.

"I'm tired, is all, Son," she said, smiling weakly. "Jes he'p me over there where's I kin rest."

Her children, especially Henry and Fannie, were more excited than they'd ever been. They'd seen bigger steamboats on the Ohio but never boarded one before. And this one was taking them to a new home, a new life. Henson told them the commune he'd founded was a place where former slaves could live and support themselves while receiving an education. They could choose to stay there or find their own piece of land when they were ready.

When the party pulled into Dawn, a bell like the ones used on plantations to call slaves to work began to ring. This time, however, the peals announced the arrival of another group of free men, women and children. Although these joyful occasions were becoming more frequent all the time, the celebrants never lost their ardor or enthusiasm. The people of Dawn had all ridden the Underground Railroad to freedom.

An early cold snap in October plunged the temperature to 20 degrees Fahrenheit in lower Canada. Alfred, Augustus and Thornton were kept busy cutting firewood for new arrivals. Every day or two a new group of around 20 weary fugitives would show up. They were all willing to do their share, but it usually took a couple of weeks for them to get rested and settled in temporary quarters.

Escape of Jane

One evening after dark, Fannie answered a knock on the door of the one-room cabin her family was occupying, to find Josiah and his wife Charlotte standing in the cold.

"Come in, come in!" Jane welcomed them. "Henry, put a couple a chairs by the fire. Fannie, close dat doe!"

"Well," asked Josiah when they'd sat down to warm themselves, "how you folks doin'?"

"We'uns doin' mighty fine," Jane replied, though she'd broken into her nasty cough at the onrush of cold air into the cabin. "We wish t' thank you for dis here cabin."

"Ain't no call fo' that," said Josiah. "We-uns come here, we had nothin' a'tall. Jest tryin' t' see yo as comfitable as possible."

"We be com'table, tha's fo sho."

Josiah frowned as Jane's answer was cut short by another hacking cough. "We hear tell they be a hard winter acomin'," he said. "Can you boys come wid us to New Market in the mawnin' fo supplies."

The young men's eyes lit up. "Sho 'nough us kin go!" Augustus volunteered.

"Sho they kin," said Jane. "We grateful t' be of he'p."

"Gratitude be ours, Jane," Charlotte replied.

"Nother thing," her husband added: "we wants t' get yo chirren into school soon's we gets us'n a teacher."

"Yessir, be good dem chirren larn," Jane agreed. "They kin already read, y'know—ever las' one of 'em." The conversation turned to small talk, and before long everyone in the family was relating his or her favorite details of the escape for their appreciative visitors. Of course the younger children tended to exaggerate, but Jane could see that Charlotte and Josiah took everything in attentively, though they must have heard similar stories many times. Finally, noticing that her mother was tiring, Caroline—who'd begun to show by now—thanked the Hensons again for their help. By now the whole family felt their friendship deeply.

Later that evening Jane reflected on the meaning of freedom. She still couldn't say what all it held for her personally, but she knew in the deepest part of herself the immeasurable difference it would make in the lives of her children. When she tucked in beside her daughters on the rough wood floor of their cabin, she fell into a dreamless peaceful sleep.

In the night without a sound, the ghost who carries us all to Glory came for Jane; her great heart stopped without pain. A smile gently curved her lips, and beneath her eyes shone a light she'd never seen before. Jane was truly free at last.

END OF STORY

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