

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-

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.

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"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,

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.

HARRIET TUBMAN

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, thin, 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."