

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

escape from slavery

ESCAPE! THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

It is dark, and I am on the edge of a forest.

After the lights went out in the big house, I slipped out of my bed, pretending to use the necessary. Years ago an old field hand told me about a place called Canada, where Negro men can live free. All I know for sure about Canada is that it's north, so I find the North Star and start running.

The old man told me there are folks above the Ohio River who can help me, if I can just make it out of Kentucky. I know my chances are slim. Anybody spots a black man on his own will know he's a runaway. I've seen captured slaves put over the barrel and beat till the blood runs down. But so what? I've got the scars on my back to prove you don't have to try escaping in order to get beat bloody.

As day breaks, I can see the birds flying north after the winter. They will show me the way. But in the distance I hear dogs barking. Can they have discovered me missing already? Or is it just a hunter? I have no idea how far I've come during the night, but I can't take the chance — I run through a stream to cover my scent and make a place to hide until the dogs pass me by or go the other way.

This is how I live for I don't know how long. Running at night, hiding during the day, taking food where I can find it, fearing the sound of every dog. I've been tired and hungry for so many days I lost count. Finally a great river lies before me. I know it must be the Ohio, the border between North and South. Slaves states and free states.

It is too big to swim, and I am too tired to keep going now. So I hide myself under leaves and sleep. When I crawl out, my breath catches in my throat — a black man is standing twenty paces in front of me, staring at me. "Come with me," he says.