

DOWN THE RIVER

by

David Wilma

Philadelphia, Penna.

August 23, 1867

My Children:

The doctor admits to me now that I will soon join your dear father in the arms of Our Lord. Or so I need to believe. In addition to my meager worldly goods, I commend to you this document that I have compiled over several years. I no longer fear retribution on this earth for my acts, and I will leave it to God to judge my life. All I seek from you is understanding and a promise to preserve my memory.

You have often heard my story of a journey over fifty years from chains to this comfortable parlor, from property to a voice for the liberation of Our People. The chronicle of my salvation, my education by kindly Christians, and our long travail to abolish slavery is well known. That story is not without embellishment, but this record does not correct every inaccuracy or dispel every myth. The popular version of the life of Phyllis Wallace Lewis has served Our Cause well enough and I will leave that person where she has been placed.

From your earliest years, you have heard others describe me as brave and selfless and determined. You have seen me stand in front of crowds and congregations as a model for all women of our race who fight injustice, and you have heard me preach. Twice, my enemies attempted to kill me, but that only made me work harder. Phyllis Lewis is a name often mentioned alongside that of Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, and I am honored to be invited into their holy company. But you will see that there is someone else here, someone I tried to leave behind me when I crossed the Ohio River.

You and the rest of the world have probably assumed that my life as a slave on the frontier was simply too horrid to remember, let alone speak of, and that my silence on the matter of my bondage was sufficient to express my suffering that my drive as an abolitionist said enough about what bondage had done to me. I was whipped and I was starved. My family was torn from me. This much you already know.

You have accepted from my evasions that my past was a perdition I cared not to visit, which is true. But visit them I did, in secret, every day as I worked and studied and struggled and fought. Every night the pain of memory gave way to sleep. The things I saw have been with me every moment for more than fifty years, and it is time I surrendered them to posterity. There is always more to history or perhaps, as you will see, there is less.

Each of us has some moment in life which we see for the rest of our days, something wonderful such as the birth of a child, or the sadness of a death. We can describe every word and every sound of those events where other details of the day are forgotten. Like a newspaper item cut from the page, that story endures, but the rest of the day's events are discarded, lost.

I have listened to testimonies from men and women who have accepted the Word of God, been born again, and who are saved. In our church, the faithful speak of how they met Our Savior and how He came into their hearts. A few of the accounts were truly dramatic, such as the man reprieved on the scaffold just after the hangman dropped the hood over his face. Since the War, the stories are of the terrible suffering in the struggle to preserve our Union and to free the slaves, of young men's bodies ripped apart by minie balls and cannon shot, and of so many friends and loved ones gone forever. I have heard the accounts of sin and dissolution, followed by some travail which the sinner survived by the grace of God and by faith to then be resurrected.

Every testimony begins with something small like a breath of wind in a sail or a bugle in a sleeping camp. The bugle signals the opening of a great and horrible battle. A mother recalled placing a bowl of soup in front of her small daughter, described meticulously the meal she had prepared, the warm biscuits, the fresh butter, and every one of the words her little girl said to her. Then the cyclone struck them with unimaginable fury, and her home, her family, all that she knew in the world, vanished. The epiphanies that each of these people experienced all started with something simple: an ordinary act that is then frozen in memory by the worst of God's creation.

I can recite every detail from the afternoon that the Morgans died. I can tell you the color of their horses, the smell of the trees, and the taste of the dust. I can describe every word spoken as clearly as if I heard it at breakfast this morning. I remember it all, not because of the screams and the blood, but because beginning that day, God chose me and tested me. Those dead men cost me my children and they almost cost me my life. But their blood paid for my freedom just as the blood of our Savior paid for our salvation. My freedom grew and blossomed into freedom for millions, but never for those whom I loved.

For me, the breath of wind, the bowl of soup, or the bugle's note is a yellow dog waking from his nap in the shade. The farm is a sad affair. The house is built of cut lumber rather than of logs, suggesting some affluence on the part of the owner when construction commenced. But the boards never knew paint, and the mossy roof shows crude patches. Any plans the builder had for a substantial home atrophied many seasons back. A porch extends across the front where the tools of homemaking – a tub, a stool, a churn, a saw – lie where last used instead of being stored in an orderly fashion. Smoke from the embers of the breakfast fire seeps from wide cracks in the chimney.

I am seated on a log in the shade, crushing boiled corn with a heavy wooden mallet. The wide trough is worn deep from years of labor. The remnants of yesterday's dried product becomes part of today's meal. I lift the tool and let it drop, using long and tiring experience to pulp the corn with little wasted effort. I do not even have to look. I take the work slowly, knowing that my masters expect no speedy conclusion to my task and that only other work awaits me at the end.

A few feet away, two dogs slumber. The spotted one snores away. He is the simpler of the two, only a little less aware napping than when awake. The yellow one is closer to me, seemingly asleep as well, but he never really rests. He is always thinking, listening, calculating.

I add more corn to the trough and raise the mallet. I glance at the yellow dog just as his eyes open and one ear moves slightly. The mallet falls into the corn. Thump. He is still a moment. I raise it again, and he raises his head. He is instantly alert, searching the tall cane in the creek bottom. Someone approaches, but all I hear are the flies buzzing in the heat. Despite my sadness and the repetition of my work I consider what might have awakened him.

His eyes narrow. His throat tightens to loose a cry. My world changes forever.

A Hard Lesson

Late one night, after the fire had died out of sight, urgent whispers spread through the slave cabins and jolted me awake. As an orphan of the slave trade, I lived with Mariah and Ike in their cabin, a tolerated guest.

“Ruth been caught stealin’ sugar!” Sarah loved to carry tales, this time about Morgan’s cook. “That no account Draper find her out on the road,” she hissed. “Brought her in ‘cause she didn’t have a pass.”

A slave away from his owner was at the mercy of any white man, unless he carried a pass or was known to be on the master’s business. As hard as life on a plantation was, the risks abroad argued against flight.

“Draper!” Mariah shot back. “He wouldn’t know a pass if it bit him on the leg. He can’t read. I hear Missus say so.” Mariah stood at our crude door, and I could see Sarah against the moonlit night. I knew of Draper too. Morgan tried him as overseer for a time, but he was too quick with his blacksnake and lazy to boot. He now wandered the mountains and valleys, trapping and trading skins for whiskey, willing neither to move on nor to do real work.

“He don’t have to read what she don’t have,” Sarah said. “Mas’ goin’ to give him a dollar for her.”

“Was she out to see her blacksmith?” Mariah asked.

“What, do you think she out for, a cup of tea? She sayin’ she forgot the sugar was in her pocket. But it was for that blacksmith.”

“Where she now?”

“O’Hara got her tied in the barn.”

“I thought slave catchers got five dollars.”

“You think Mas’ is goin’ to pay five dollars to someone like Draper? He not a real slave catcher.”

“You think Ruth’d try to pay him off herself,” Mariah said.

“You mean with the sugar?”

“No, not with the sugar. Knowin’ that Draper, and knowin’ that Ruth, he *did* trade with her, but Draper brought her in anyway.”

Sarah rushed to the next cabin to deliver her news, fattened with Mariah’s contributions. Sarah could be counted upon to embellish any tale and you could never tell how much of what Sarah said was true. Still, I could see that Ruth faced serious trouble.

“I hope Mas’ lays ‘em on her,” Ike muttered as he reached over to stir the fire from his bed. Small flames struggled out of the coals and reflected off his broad face, but finding little fuel, expired to the memory of heat.

“Hush,” Mariah said as she rejoined her man. “You could be one of them who has to hold her down. How you goin’ to like that, up close while he whip her? You probably dream about bein’ that close to her.”

“Fine with me. Her and her yellow skin and her white woman’s dress. Always lordin’ over us. Wonder if she sleep in the kitchen now?”

“You just better hope he don’t ask if you know about it. If he think we know she was sneakin’ out on him and stealin’, we’re all in for somethin’. If he ask you, you don’t know nothin’.”

Theft was a crime, and even at fourteen I could not dispute the justice for stealing something as precious as sugar. The only sweetener I ever tasted was sorghum or honey, so a slave stealing real sugar not only represented the loss of something expensive, but the crossing of that line between black and white, a far greater transgression. Stealing sugar represented a threat to the order of the world.

In the morning, word came down: the master wants everybody at the big tree. An immense oak, one survivor of dozens we had felled in the valley, marked the boundary between the slave cabins below and the master’s family who lived further up the slope. No slave traveled above the tree without a specific purpose, and he stayed there no longer than was required. By the same token, Morgan rarely frequented the slave cabins downhill, leaving that task to the overseer or his son, William. If we saw Morgan at the cabins, it was on his horse and with his short whip.

Reluctantly the Morgan slaves, in the brown and gray dusty homespun reflective of our lives and spirits, shambled in twos and threes up to the tree where the master waited. Each one of us wanted to be last. Morgan stood facing us with his arms folded, his weight on one leg, as if his carriage were late. He wore a fresh white shirt, tan breeches, and those tall brown riding boots. That cool summer morning, he left behind his hat, showing us his close-cropped grey hair and hard hazel eyes. We stopped at the tree and clustered around the trunk like shipwreck victims clinging to scrap of timber in an angry sea. Two women carried infants and several wide-eyed

urchins clung to their mothers' dresses. I tried to keep out of his sight behind the trunk along with Mariah until we heard that voice.

“Get out from behind there!” Morgan ordered. “I want to see all of you!”

I took a place at one side of the group, my eyes down, already skilled at watching the master without looking at him. About twenty feet separated me from Morgan. Despite his short stature, the slope gave him the advantage over me. I stared at an oak gall on the ground. Morgan did not whip his slaves much; he did not have to. But when he did, he knew how to whip. He whipped for the best effect, not just for the poor wretch on the ground, but for the rest of us. A loose cow, a cabin burned by an untended fire, sleeping instead of working – all invited stripes. Of the worst offenses, particularly running away, Morgans had little fear. He thoughtfully crafted whippings so that not just the miscreant received his leather education, but the onlookers learned from the ordeal as well. In a manner of speaking, when the Morgans whipped, everyone felt whipped.

The elder Morgan had a certain flair for ceremony, an almost theatrical talent in that way. If some act of negligence or even rarer act of malice came to his attention, he made certain he delivered an extreme display of temper, not widely viewed, but in front of one or two. These wagging tongues carried his explosion back to the slave quarters in magnified iteration. The retelling improved on his anger to the extent that the master walked up walls, performed somersaults, and shrieked like a madman. Even the unlettered slave knows the difference between someone who is simply intent on doing harm and one who is crazed.

Morgan customarily administered whippings, not in the morning when the punishment might be lost in the day's labors, but in the evening when we all shared a few waking hours of community. We could slumber with screams and blood in our minds.

“Victor!” Morgan would announce, ordering the hapless victim to shuffle forward, embarrassment as strong an emotion as fear. Improbably, almost every slave was taller than David Morgan, making the quaking prisoner look even more incongruous next to his judge. “I have a lame horse because of you,” or “The dogs got into the smoke house and ate my meat,” enumerated the precise nature of the offense. In a civilized culture this would be called indictment, trial, and conviction. But slavery was not a civilized world. On a plantation all is the whim of the master. Jewell talked back to the overseer once and Morgan heard it. She thrashed about on the ground against the men on her arms and legs while O’Hara lifted her shift to lay into her backside. I am certain that the ignominy of her nakedness hurt as much as the stripes themselves. Making the other slaves participate in the punishment confirmed Morgan’s power over us. Being so close to the squirming, bawling victim gave everyone a taste of the whip. We heard about backs flogged bloody and mutilations on other plantations, so we believed we had a good, fair master.

O’Hara the overseer and Draper dragged Ruth up from the barn, one to an arm. When she saw the gathering at the tree and Morgan calmly waiting, she began to bellow like a terrified sheep. The white men brought her in front of Morgan and let her go. She collapsed onto the ground and crawled across the dirt towards him. The blue house dress that she had received from Mrs. Morgan was dirty and covered with bits of straw. More straw and feathers stuck to her wild black hair. She barely resembled the haughty woman who slept in the white people’s kitchen and who was so quick to notice my muddy feet or my dirty shift.

Ruth reached out toward Morgan’s feet, crying, “Please, Mas’, I– I–”

“Shut up, you thieving pig!” he screamed as he dropped his hands into balled fists. I had known the master all my life, but I had never heard that voice before. It seemed to come from

deep within him, and it hit me like a blow to the stomach. All the faces reflected awe and fear, and I heard a muffled sob. Draper grinned, showing teeth on only one side of his mouth. O'Hara laughed. Mrs. Morgan watched from the porch of the house.

“You find this amusing Mr. O'Hara?” Morgan snapped.

“No sar,” O'Hara answered, recoiling, his usual reaction in Morgan's presence. Morgan barely tolerated the Irishman, as much for his obsequiousness as for his race. Morgan held the same contempt for Hibernians as he did for Africans.

“Well, you are correct. This is not amusing. Not at all. No. This is actually very sad.” Morgan answered. The mock desolation changed quickly to viciousness. “Ruth thinks she can steal from me. She thinks she can steal from my grandchildren. She thinks she is smarter than me. She has taken food from my table, and she has betrayed the trust that I have placed in her.”

Ruth whimpered up from the dust, “Naw, suh, please...”

“Quiet! I don't want to hear you. Don't say another word!” He then looked at all of us. “Ruth here has stolen from her master. I have given her food and a warm place to sleep and clothing. I have given her easy work in the house. She answers my charity and my goodness with theft, with ... betrayal. She has insulted me, and she has tried to make me the fool! This slave has stolen from me, David Morgan. She must be punished!”

If there was such a thing as a good master, Morgan might have been one. But I will never believe that a man who would exercise ownership over another human being, however benignly, could be construed as fair or good. I certainly cannot call Morgan, bad though. (I must remind myself that such judgments are to be left to The Lord, and it is for me to forgive.) If it is necessary to compare people, they perhaps should not be held up against the whole of society,

but against others like them. I could not compare David Morgan to Abraham Lincoln, who did not own slaves, but I could compare him to Edward Osborn who did. In that setting, Morgan was not a bad owner. He did not take advantage of slave women, and he did not approve of those white men who did. If he found an overseer molesting a slave, he sent the scum packing. That did not stop Morgan from accepting ownership of the mulatto children born in his slave cabins. Yellow children brought a fine price. Morgan did not mistreat his slaves needlessly, any more than he mistreated his horses. But David Morgan could be quite dangerous.

“A master has great responsibilities,” Morgan said to O’Hara, but the runty Irishman was not his intended audience. “I must feed them all and clothe them all, and I must make certain that there is order here. What would happen if slaves were allowed to steal?” O’Hara could never possibly answer such a profound question. “God help us if every slave decided to steal and run off.”

Ruth started to get to her knees and pleaded, “Please, Mas’ Morgan, I didn’t run—”

“Shut up!” screamed Morgan again, and his heavy brown boot shoved her back to the ground.

“And William, you know the worst of this?” Morgan turned to his son, taller and fairer than his father, although always smaller in his presence. The son took after his mother in countenance, but without her loyalty or her sense of hard work.

“No, Pa,” William answered, unimpressed by the whipping of a simpering slave. William preferred victims who resisted their fate.

“Every nigger in the county will hear about this. Every nigger will know what Ruth has done. Now, every nigger will know what I did about it. She thinks she can steal and that I will

not notice. If I do not do something about this right now, right this minute, these niggers will think I am soft. They might even think that Ruth is smarter than I am. We can't have that, can we?" No reply. "William?"

"No, Pa."

I rarely heard Morgan call us niggers. We might be Coloreds or Negroes or Africans or hands, but almost never niggers. Ruth made weak sounds on the ground that may have been words. That day Ruth, the privileged house servant, was one of us, just another piece of property.

"O'Hara, your rope," Morgan ordered calmly. No one made a sound, but I was certain that Morgan heard my heart beating. O'Hara stepped forward with a rope used on horses. Morgan pointed into the tree. O'Hara clumsily swung the line up into the tree without success. A second try failed too. On the third attempt it snaked over a limb, dropping to the other side. I saw that Morgan was going to give her a real flogging, but Ruth looked up and seemed puzzled. Her tears had turned the dust on her face into streaks of mud on her amber skin. Morgan took the end of the rope, and he began to tie a substantial slipknot. I had worried that I would finally be one of the slaves ordered to hold Ruth, yet I was strangely fascinated at this novel way to whip someone, hands hoisted over the head. Victor had told of such a whipping in Virginia. The strung-up victim twisted away from the lash only to take stripes across the front of his body.

"Get her up here," Morgan ordered. O'Hara and Draper took Ruth by the arms and hair and lifted her to her feet. She just hung between them, unable to stand on her own. While Draper held her up, O'Hara grabbed her hands and held them out toward Morgan and the rope. Morgan stood in front of her, his hazel eyes fixed and cold. I had seen that look in him when he traded horses and when he made speeches at elections. He concentrated on his task and he intended to

win. Whatever Morgan did, he needed to win. Morgan held the open rope in front of Ruth's face. I was behind her and could not see her eyes, but I heard her bawl.

"Ruth, you are no good to me anymore," Morgan stated calmly, decisively. But Ruth was beyond understanding him. O'Hara thrust Ruth's wrists toward Morgan as if he were forcing her to pray to him, the heathen African begging the white man for salvation. Draper held her by the shoulders, grinning with anticipation.

"I cannot trust you now. I cannot let you in my house or near my grandchildren. I cannot even sell you. What good is a cow that won't give milk anymore? She's just meat on a rope." His eyes did not move from Ruth, and he repeated a bit more softly, "Meat on a rope." A woman behind me gasped, earning her an elbow.

In a twitch, Morgan dropped the noose over Ruth's head and cinched it quickly around her neck.

"Haul on that line!" he ordered.

Draper fell on the rope over the limb and began pulling. O'Hara quickly joined him. Both men seemed as surprised as any of us, but they were completely under Morgan's sway. Ruth grabbed at the rope on her throat as the white men lifted her to her toes. She gagged "A-k-k-k-k-k" and spun around so that we could see her face, eyes and mouth wide open. Now that they had her weight, Draper and O'Hara pulled inexpertly until she was off her toes a few inches and swinging free. She kicked and twisted as she fought the hemp closing off her throat. Her eyeballs bulged and her tongue filled her mouth. The choking soon stopped and her struggles slowed until, first one hand, then the other, dropped to her side. She just swung there, mouth half open, eyes vacant. The only sound was the creaking of hemp against the oak limb.

Slaves spoke of bad Negroes being hanged and they even joked about it, but the idea that Morgan would hang a woman for stealing sugar was outside the realm of possibility, beyond imagination. Killing a slave was the destruction of valuable property worth hundreds of dollars, like shooting a horse or burning down a barn. I was at the same time stunned and sick and transfixed. As hard and sometimes as painful as life on a farm was, there was little real cruelty. I butchered cows and hogs and game, but we knocked them in the head and cut their throats so that they died quickly. The animals fought some, but it was over in a few seconds. They surrendered their meat to us, untainted by their agony.

This thing with Ruth, however, was raw brutality, and I could not comprehend it, particularly in that safe and familiar valley. I think we all knew that our master was capable of violence, but beyond his flashes of anger and the odd whipping, we had never really seen it. Ruth swung slowly her hands and feet twitching ever so slightly.

“Let go!” ordered Morgan, and the white men released the rope, Draper a little less readily than O’Hara. Ruth dropped to the ground like a sack of grain, and her head slammed onto the hard ground. Her long, dirty, curly hair covered her face. Morgan stepped over and loosened the noose. Ruth gasped for air and choked and coughed. Her hands went to her throat to pull at the noose, and she took in a deep breath.

“Haul her up!” Morgan told the white men and Draper pulled on the rope which he still held in his hand. Reluctantly this time, O’Hara lent his weight to the task.

“Nooooo!” rasped Ruth as she struggled to her feet to fight the noose, but in an instant she was swinging again, kicking. Her fight stopped more quickly this time and her arms again went limp. Her eyes stared blankly past us as her body rotated, no longer a human being, just...

meat on a rope. Two women cried softly. William seemed unimpressed. Mrs. Morgan flushed and her lips pursed in anger.

I stole a glance at Morgan. He wasn't watching his cook strangle slowly under the limb. He was watching us. He was watching me. Those around me stared at a spot on the ground beneath where Ruth was dying. They couldn't watch her choke and they couldn't look at Morgan and they couldn't look away.

"Drop it!" Morgan commanded as casually as he would summon a cup. The body crumpled once again, and Draper seemed to enjoy letting go as much as hauling up. Morgan and reached down again to loosen the halter. But this time he shook the loop open and wrested it from her neck, letting her head flop into the dust. She gasped again and coughed and gagged.

Morgan held out the noose right towards me and spoke calmly, slowly. "Any of you ever think about stealing from me, ask Ruth what it is like to be hung. Ask her what it's like when the darkness falls over you and you start to cross over into the great beyond. Any of you steal from me, you will *beg* me to whip you. You will *beg* me to shoot you. You will *beg* me to cut your throat." He showed no emotion. He could have been directing the division of a hog or the saddling of a horse, instead of the murder of a human being. "O'Hara, Ruth works the fields now, and I expect a full day out of her today. Mariah! You cook me my breakfast." He then pointed at me. "Bring her with you."

With that, Morgan turned and walked into his house. O'Hara told two of the women to see to Ruth. The rest of our people drifted quickly but silently down to chores, just happy to be free of this. O'Hara snarled some commands to Peter about the day's work. I looked at Mariah, whose eyes were wide with surprise. She turned without a word, hurried up to the side of the master's house and the kitchen. I followed, full of shock and terror and sadness, but also with no

little excitement at this change in my own fortune. Both Mariah and I had been promoted from field work to the house. Working at the master's house allowed access to better food, better clothing, albeit discarded by the master and his family, and generally easier duties. Our status among our people rose too. We could hear what the master said and would be first to carry any news of the little plantation. People would gather around us in the small chance that we had some morsel of gossip they could carry or keep.

It was undoubtedly Draper who started the story around. He had his dollar from Morgan, a taste for whiskey, and a need to sound important. By the time we visited town a week later, everyone, white and Negro, had heard that Morgan had hanged Ruth for eating a spoonful of sugar. A white boy told me Morgan hauled Ruth up with just one hand and that it took an hour for her to die. The boy knew because he had seen it with his own eyes. People said Morgan would hang a woman for burning his breakfast and Morgan's slaves were so frightened of him that none of us would ever tell what really happened that day, so don't believe anything any of us said.

Morgan never spoke of the incident again. That fall, he was elected commissioner and head of the militia. It was his county.

Virginia

I was born the property of David Morgan in Virginia in about the year 1794. I do not know the date precisely, because Morgan did not record the births of his slaves; but by counting back from other events, I settled on the year 1794. Slave sales and reports of runaways were carefully documented, because these transactions represented value gained, traded, or lost. A slave who died was money lost, but a slave birth warranted no documentation for Morgan since a baby could do no work. Our master did not count his property until it had value and brought him profit. My worth came when I was about six years of age and was tall enough to swing a stick and herd stock.

My mother's name was Ella, and we slept in a windowless log cabin in which she could barely stand and which provided us little more than room to sleep. Our bed was made of boughs and a few blankets on the ground. A small, mud fireplace provided some heat. We ate with others in their cabins or outside, where group meals were the custom. I saw precious little of my mother during the day because she worked the fields. My strongest memory is of her warmth at my back. I saw women tend tobacco with babies strapped to their backs and I can only assume that is how I spent my first year. Once weaned from my mother's milk, I joined the other babies..

An old woman herded about us like so many geese or ducks. Perhaps the age of five or six was not so much the point of being productive as when the inactivity became troublesome. Climbing a fence indicated a certain skill that might evolve to some bad purpose, but could be directed to a benefit for the master. While the women cooked or carded flax or made baskets or washed the master's clothes, the children played in the dust among the flies, if the weather allowed, or we wandered the farm in search of food and diversion. In winter we clustered around a fire in a cabin. Of those first years I remember very little, and of my mother, even less, except

for her warmth and soft voice in the night. Never knowing my mother or a father left more than just a void within me. A hard place grew that no one ever saw, a hard place that served me well in the years to come. That spiritual could have been written for me:

Got one mind for white folks to see.

‘Nother for what I know is me.

He don’t know.

He don’t know.

Billy, the boy with the club foot, first took me to the fold to instruct me how to drop the fence rails that snaked between the fields. “Push girl!” he shouted, “push!” I struggled under the rough split wood, but I was much too small to budge the massive chestnut beam. I fell to the ground in tears. Disgusted, he hobbled over and knocked the fence down himself, and I jumped out of the way to avoid a damaged toe. In a year I could do it by myself. Billy showed me how to use the stick to goad cows out to the pasture. Between his halting gait and my short legs, we managed to keep up with the ponderous beasts.

“Now you watch yourself,” he warned. “You get under one of them cows, and you end up like old Hamper and his half a face.” Hamper was born with a monstrous countenance and the ability only to mumble. But he had a strong back and the master had ample need of that. “And don’t let one of those hogs get a finger. You lose a finger, you get the lockjaw. You get the lockjaw, they cut off your hand. You lose a hand, Master get rid of you.”

Although I did not grasp it completely at the time, I understood enough to know that being “got rid of” was a bad thing. I heard adults whisper these words and “sold away” with

great apprehension. What they feared, I feared. I presumed at the time that it involved one of the demons who snatched lazy or disrespectful children in the night. Hamper's hideous face and the stump of an arm concerned me more than the demons, however.

In spite of the risk of pain and disfigurement though (a child does not understand death), I was immediately struck by the fact that I, a mere child upon whom the world showers its needs and wants, who had no importance and no power, could actually cause one of these great brown beasts to go in a direction that I chose! Me! You can only imagine the thrill I felt being able to whip a cow, many times heavier and taller than little me, and have her move. To be sure, they were all accustomed to the daily routine of pen to pasture, so it wasn't as if I taught them anything. But for the first time in my life I could make something happen, and I could not have been more excited if I had a new toy made of corn husk.

Naturally, it was the overseer and the drivers who decided where the cattle would go each day, but I was the one who made them do it. Once I got the stock to the appointed pasturage, I watched that they did not blunder into a neighbor's lot or begin to graze in the corn or beans or wander into the woods to disappear. Allowing stock into food crops intended for people and market earned a whipping. If a cow ate people food the loss came not off the master's table, but out of the slave pot. It only took one swipe with my own stick in the grip of a hungry field hand to teach me that.

One sunny day, all I had to do was make certain that none of the cattle crossed the stream. Tobacco had exhausted a field and only manure and time would help bring it back to some use. Since there were no tasty corn stalks nearby to entice the animals away, I handled this easily from a rock on the bank as my charges grazed on the weeds. The water flowed lazily alongside the pasture across a muddy bottom pocked with thousands of animal tracks. Bugs

danced across the surface in some race against fish. I soaked my leathery feet in the clear water and drew random designs in the mud with my stick. The clink of tack prefaced a blocking of the sun. I looked up to see the master's sorrel gelding twisting his head against the bit. High up on the horse's back sat the master, he who whipped and fed and sold away, the most powerful being in my universe.

Even through the eyes of a child and across all these years, that image of David Morgan remains one of a man much too small for his horse. During the war, I once saw General Phil Sheridan ride by, his powerful steed and imperious bearing calculated to mask his small size. My first thought then was not of the Hero of the Shenandoah, but of Master David Morgan of Patrick County, Virginia. David Morgan never led a deadly army of thousands, with cannon and horses and wagons, but he exerted no less power over me and the other slaves on our plantation. From his horse, Morgan towered over anyone on foot, an important object for anyone in need of dominating his surroundings. When I received the Word of God before I was baptized a Christian, my image of a higher power was not of Jesus on the cross or some old man with a long white beard, but of David Morgan on a horse wearing a wide hat that almost covered his face.

Slaves tried to slip out of the master's way when he approached, the alternative being to remain hard at work. Not that Morgan was naturally cruel and whipped people out of hand, but the easiest way to avoid trouble was to avoid the master, indeed any white man. I had always been told to stay away from white people and was admonished at every turn never to speak to a white man unless he spoke to me. And I was never, ever, to look a white man in the eye. I had seen the master at a distance and heard the whispered warnings, so it was with great anxiety that I found myself not only close to this mighty dangerous apparition, but fully under his gaze.

From my rock down in the creek, I could not see the master's face, but I knew who was there, and I could tell he was looking at me, only me. I froze, trying to keep my eyes down. I looked at his tall boot and ugly spur in the bright metal stirrup. From his wrist hung a short leather whip. He was still for a moment, meeting the moves of the horse with the slightest workings of his hand. Then he took hold of the whip.

I had seen the white overseer do the same. He would flick the handle of his whip into his palm as a signal that pain would quickly follow. The slave had an instant to contemplate the impending pain. The overseer then lifted his heels and elbows, swung the whip up, and brought it down with the full force of his body. Not only did the leather slash into head and back, but for many the blow was enough to knock them to the ground. It was my turn for a thrashing. Morgan lifted his arm slightly and I knew I had never been beaten as I was about to be. Morgan snapped it down sharply against his tall boot with a loud crack that pierced my body.

I cried out and wet myself. I jumped up and splashed through the stream into the pasture and up to the nearest cow, engaged in nothing more offensive than chewing her cud. I smashed at her with my stick, driving her across the field, fully expecting lashes across my back. I glanced back toward the creek, but the master had already turned the gelding away in a slow walk, his body gently rocking with the horse's step. I stood there, smelling no better now than the cow, grateful to him for not beating me.

Kentucky

I had been tending stock for two summers when Morgan moved west. That was the year 1800. Morgan planted his middling plantation in Virginia to tobacco. But leaf ravages the soil, and slaves stayed busy clearing new land when not tending the delicate plants, worming, weeding, picking, and curing. A field is good for only a few years in tobacco before it is left fit only for poor pasture. A tobacco planter constantly searches for more land, like a bear or a panther always tracking the next meal. Morgan ran out of land and the country over the mountains held promise for him as it has for so many others.

The first to disappear were Billy and Hamper. They followed another planter down the road as if they were simply being hired out. Billy struggled on his bad foot to keep up with the mounted man. Hamper smiled as best he could. I never saw my mother leave. I heard how it happened years later.

The overseer ordered her away from rendering tallow and sent her to see the master. She found Morgan astride his horse with another white man, a slave, and a cart. The white man's brown frock coat and a black felt hat marked him as another planter.

"Ella, go with Mister Fairburne here. You're with him now," Morgan announced.

My mother brought her hands to her face and emitted a long sad cry of "eeeeeeeeeeee!" before turning to run.

"Enoch," Fairburne stated casually as if reminding the slave to empty a chamber pot.

The slave took a few easy strides and seized my mother with both arms. He lifted her from the ground, and she thrashed with her legs. "My baby! My baby! Phyllis!" she cried as Enoch carried her to the cart. Without being bid, the slave bound my mother's arms with rope set

in the cart for that purpose. My mother's fear and anguish prevented her from fighting well and Enoch's superior strength and practiced skill overcame her. He worked her elbows behind her and quickly had her pinioned. Her feet presented less of a problem as she succumbed to the inevitable. In less than the time it takes to saddle a horse, my mother became a sobbing, distraught bundle of paid-for property hauled away with potatoes and squash.

The new owner turned his horse to follow the cart with "Best of luck to you, Morgan."

"And to you too, Fairburne."

To prevent trouble, Morgan snatched my mother away quickly like an annoying thorn stuck in flesh best removed in one sharp motion rather than worried out slowly to greater pain. Thus I became an orphan of the slave trade.

Esther found me at my cabin. I suspected something troubled her, but she quickly distracted me.

"Your mama not home yet. Why not come and stay with us tonight?" A night in a cabin with other children made me forget all about my mother. Thomas and Albert and I had played together until I went to the fields, and I found them cheerful company before the fire. Esther made more than enough supper for us, placing the surplus fritters into a basket. The hot, tasty fritters filled us up and fits of laughter soon left us sleepy. The dying fire watched me doze off.

My slumber was broken by Esther's soft voice. "Time to go." We stumbled into pandemonium. A bonfire illuminated all the farm's carts, yoked to oxen. The Morgans, father and son, both walked their horses back and forth snapping orders to men and women who loaded bundles and boxes and baskets into the carts. The master's wife, clutching a shawl against the cold, directed the loading of his belongings. I found the scene exciting and fascinating, and the

boys and I warmed ourselves at the fire as the commotion continued. When the tumult began to abate, Esther took us from the fire to a cart where she piled the two boys on top of sacks.

“Phyllis,” she told me, “you stay behind this cart. You’ll be with the stock, but not till it gets light.” More shouts and the cart with the boys bumped forward. They quickly dropped off to sleep as I walked behind looking forward to the wonderments that lie ahead. A man led each pair of oxen. Often his wife trudged along beside him as if they might lose each other in the dark.

The whole exercise of keeping up with the great wheels, whose hubs I could just reach, and staying out from under the ponderous oxen prevented me from considering that I was leaving something behind.

Dawn pushed back the chilly night and clouds greeted our day. I walked behind the cart down a road I had never seen. We passed small farms and a few planters’ homes where cook fires reheated suppers for a morning meal. The chimneys leaked smoke indifferently into yards and pastures. In twilight, slaves and some white people tended stock, cut wood, and carried loads. Every one of them looked hard at our caravan as it headed west, but no one betrayed a thought or a feeling. Were they envious? Fearful for us? Fearful for themselves? Or just curious?

Thomas and Albert and I were the only children on the journey. Morgan could not be troubled with anyone not up to the trip or life in the new land and the other children disappeared. But Peter was the driver and letting the slave who drove the other slaves keep his children bought his and Esther’s continuing allegiance.

The excited, high-pitched chatter of an outing soon dissipated to a silent slog as each saved his energy for the journey ahead. In all, our party was about twenty slaves, a multitude to me. The only white people were Morgan, his wife, Anna, their son, William, William’s wife and

baby girl, and the overseer. The white men rode horses and the Morgan women rode in the front carts. Occasionally the white women walked, but the overseer and the slaves always walked.

Once the sun came up, I trailed alongside the stock, whipping back into line any animals which stopped to eat or drink. I saw Morgan frequently, sitting his mare off to the side of the track, the drooping brim of his wide hat like a grim scowl for his whole being.

With the nudge of a knee, Morgan cantered up along the line his ugly whip hanging carelessly from his wrist. But his strength and the fear he evoked also represented a center around which my world revolved. Here was a predictable force, a safety of sorts, like a river that at once gave life in the form of fish and water and travel, but also took life with a swift current and floods. My very existence moved with the master, and I easily succumbed to the idea that as long as I served him, all would be well. I had to be careful not to be caught staring at him; still I could not help but be drawn in by his power.

Two ruts took us through the rolling Piedmont past other plantations then small farms that got rougher as we traveled. I noticed differences in the trees and in the soil. The rocks grew larger and I saw mountains for the first time. Trees crowded the trail until it became a dark, leafy tunnel. Permanent, mortised fences gave way to crudely stacked saplings, then no fences at all. The people changed too. Whites grew poorer and wilder and spoke to each other in strange tongues. Few Negroes appeared. Other travelers camped just off the trail, families with a cart and a mule, or just a mule or two, but nothing the size of our party. We stopped once a day to cook and to rest. At dusk we camped, allowing the hobbled animals to graze. The women cooked up mush, fry bread, and perhaps some freshly killed meat. William Morgan possessed a keen skill with his rifle and he provided our party with venison. It was autumn when we moved. I

remember because I wore moccasins. At night, I huddled with Thomas and Albert under rough blankets. While we twitched and giggled, people talked around the fire.

“Be walking like this ten, twenty days.”

“Master say the new land rich.”

“I hear he got a whole valley in Kentucky.”

“I hear he got a whole county.”

“How much is a county?”

“More’n you can walk across in a week.”

“A month.”

“A year.”

“Shawnee in Kentucky.”

“No. Shawnee been whipped. All run off west.”

“Some left, though.”

“Maybe. Best to stay close.”

“Shawnee don’t steal niggers.”

“Shawnee steal anybody. Kill anybody. Cut your nose off. Eat that tongue of yours.

Might not bother to kill you to eat that tongue.”

“Nawwww.”

“Best to stay close.”

The cold was enough to keep me close to the fire or under a cart, but worrying about Shawnees helped.

The caravan entered mountains that crowded in close to the trail. As my gaze went up to the wondrous heights of mountains, I tripped on roots and rocks. I had never seen nor imagined the land turned on its side and reaching for the sky like that. These mountains were to be my world for the next fifteen years. For the remainder of my days, the rest of the world stood next to those mountains. I compared the buildings of New York and Philadelphia to the Alleghenies. Pennsylvania had mountains too, but not like these. Before the trail tipped down into Kentucky, we stopped seeing settlements or plantations or farms of any sort. The last day, we drove the cattle single file along a game trail barely wide enough for the carts. The track followed up a clear stream to a place where the valley broadened out to bottom land, thick with cane and immense poplars and maples and beeches. We turned the cattle and hogs out onto the leafy forest floor to fatten on mast. The great carts were unloaded one last time and our camp transformed over the next few weeks to crude lean-tos and hearths of stacked stone.

To clear the new land in Kentucky, the slaves girdled the great trees carving wide deep scars in the bark so that the rest would die. The leaves quickly fell adding their manure to the rich, black loam. Men marked off the green meadows into fields and pastures and attacked the forest with broadaxes and saws, first for fence rails, then for logs. The oxen dragged the felled trees to the river bank where men bucked the logs then rolled them over the pits built into the bank to saw lumber. After we built the master a large cabin (I helped some) and the overseer a small one, we put up stables and more fences. Only then did the slaves build homes for themselves, smaller but tighter and easier to heat than the ones for the white people. The master

had a stone hearth and chimney with mud mortar. Our chimneys were of sticks and mud, but these did not last long, and eventually we got stone chimneys too. Being a mere child my efforts remained the simplest and lightest of tasks like filling chinks in log walls or tending animals. My excitement at the trip over the mountains gave way to work and the life of a slave where fatigue framed every day and the only joy came from food and rest and a little laughter. But since I knew nothing else, I had no sense of anything different, anything better.

I marveled at the new land, which was greener and rockier and taller than Virginia. The chestnut and oak and poplar amazed me with their size, and the forest offered us an unlimited bounty. In all my travels over the years, I cannot recall seeing a country so full of life and promise. We had plenty of meat that first year. Deer and bison came out of the dense cane to feast on the young corn only to become meals themselves. William Morgan and men with guns waited in the night for the thieves to slip up on the crop. Our men got quite good at timing several shots together to bring down two trespassers at once. The gunshots that woke us promised fresh venison. What we did not eat went to a smokehouse or was traded. We worked hard, but we ate well that first year.

This is really where my story begins, along the Louisa Fork of the Big Sandy River, which tumbled out of the mountains before meandering north to the Ohio. I left childhood on this rough plantation in a fertile valley hemmed in by hills, a place of bondage and labor, but also one of security and order and happiness. Anything that ever represented comfort to me, such as my bed or my home, recalled a vision of that clear stream shouldered by rocky hills and cushioned by tall trees. Since we came down out of the mountains, the direction of the future and of progress always felt downstream. The past and loss were back behind us, back over the mountains. Ahead was progress and plenty.

It was at Morgan's that the events that shaped my life unfolded, all in the shadow of a small white man on a large horse.