

From the Railroad

By Aaron Yappert

“Mother, Mother! I think someone is coming from the railroad,” I hollered into the kitchen of our upstate New York home.

“Well if that’s the case, hurry on up and make yourself presentable, Louis,” Mother told me. I was nine years old when this pair of slaves came to our house. Mother had escaped from the vicious, abusive cotton plantation in Georgia she’d been forced onto about five years ago. She had run away from the plantation master when she heard of a group assembling to make a dash for their lives. I was only four years old at the time that my mother fled for her life, and my memories are not as vivid as hers, but I still remember the feeling that everywhere we went we were being stalked beyond measure.

We had been helping the poor, beaten African-Americans who were fleeing their plantations by way of the Underground Railroad since we had received our freedom; we had witnessed immeasurable amounts of abuse and mistreatment. We had seen groups that had been malnourished to the point that they had lost all their teeth. Some fleeing slaves were so weak they could hardly stand. Some were even forced to crawl on their hands and knees due to lack of food. There had been rashes that spread all along the body making it appear as if it were painted red. People had sores that were completely open, oozing a vile combination of blood and puss.

At that moment we heard a sharp quick rap at the door. When we opened the door we both gasped in shock at the sight of the two figures. The man in front was dressed in a tattered coat that could barely stay on his frail shoulders. The woman standing behind him appeared just as frightening. She looked as if she were a stick of dried beef that had been beaten and bruised until tender. Both figures were covered in purple and black welts. Mother immediately went to work ushering them into the house and helping them into chairs. She instructed me to give them cups of cider to warm their cold bones.

When the couple was comfortable they began to tell their story of the plantation life they’d escaped. They talked of a cruel slave master who beat them at every move that showed weakness. They were fed twice a day, and with only enough food to stay alive. They were forced to sleep in a building that housed all the slaves. They said the building was locked at night and smelled of death. From what we gathered from the story they were worked from first light to dark. When they weren’t working in the fields they were either locked in the building or helping store plantation crop.

When Mother heard their story I saw the look in her eyes that told of her horrific life at the plantation as well, and how her flee from death had been much the same. Mother did all she could to make the couple feel out of danger, but every creak and groan of the house made them jump. She encouraged the couple telling them they only had a day of traveling to gain their freedom.

“Louis, go fetch blankets for these poor friends and make their beds.” I quickly did her bidding knowing how much it hurt her and how it brought up feelings and pains of her own escape to see how these people were. I never really remembered the plantation very well but I could remember glimpses of moments and knew exactly how the two felt.