

I. Terror by Night

Mary sat on the step in front of the door of her one-room cabin rocking her baby in her arms as she hummed a simple melody. The wintry sun had almost no heat, but at least it had light. Inside the cabin it was dark, dark as her thoughts. Pretty four-year-old Melissa and husky Jim, two years younger, played in the dirt at her feet.

Last Sunday—was it only last Sunday, or was it a hundred years ago?—her husband Giles had walked over from the Grant plantation, and during their few quiet hours together she had been happy, oh, so happy. Then yesterday they had brought her word that Giles had fallen off the wagon when they were hauling logs, and his life had been crushed out. Never, never would she be really happy again!

Mary had been born on the Grant plantation seventeen or eighteen years before and didn't know what it was to be free, for her father and mother were both slaves. She was forced to work hard. If she displeased her mistress, she was severely punished. Her mistress wasn't a cruel woman, but she didn't believe slaves had feelings. Fortunately, Mrs. Grant was fairly even-tempered, so it wasn't often that Mary displeased her. The slaves on the Grant plantation were treated well, all things considered; and they were allowed a certain amount of free time. Giles, a strong and handsome young slave, was greatly attracted to the quiet, gentle Mary.

Moses Carver, who owned the farm next to the Grant plantation, did not believe in slavery. "No man has a right to own another human being, no matter what his color," he often said, so he would not buy anyone to help him on his farm. He bred and raised horses. Because he was frugal, it was rumored that he had a pretty penny stashed away somewhere in his home.

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The Carvers had had only one child; and when that baby girl was laid in a narrow grave on the hillside, Mrs. Carver felt old and tired.

"Moses, I just can't do all the housework like I used to," she complained. "I wish you'd get a young slave girl to help me."

"But, Susan, you know how I feel about having a slave. It just isn't right. People aren't like cattle or horses, to be bought and sold."

"Yes, but I can't do the work anymore." And she shook her head as she sighed heavily.

At last, worn down by the sight of his wife's tired face, Moses walked over to the next plantation.

"Colonel Grant, I need a young girl to help my wife with the housework. Do you happen to have one I could buy?" he asked.

"Why, yes, I have a strong, healthy young female about thirteen years old that might suit you," was the reply.

As soon as Moses Carver saw Mary, he knew that his Susan would love her. He willingly paid Colonel Grant the seven hundred dollars for the young girl. And Moses wasn't wrong, for Susan's eyes shone when he brought Mary into their kitchen.

Mary was bewildered and afraid. She wondered what the future would hold for her. Would her new owner be cruel and demanding? It was hard to be torn from her friends, especially from Giles, whom she loved so dearly. But Mary didn't need to be afraid long, for the woman's face lighted up when she saw the sweet young girl. She hurried forward and put her arm around her shoulders.

"My husband tells me your name is Mary. I'm so happy to have you live with us, Mary," she said warmly.

"Thank you, ma'am," Mary answered.

"No, child, don't call me 'ma'am.' You just call us Uncle Moses and Aunt Susan. You are part of our family now. Come, we have lots of work, so let's get busy." Aunt Susan spoke more briskly and happily than she had for a long time.

And so it was from then on. Aunt Susan was always right there working beside Mary. The girl didn't feel as if she were a slave; rather she was part of a family now. Colonel Grant allowed Giles

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to go over to the Carver farm every Sunday, and of course, Mary simply lived for those hours when they could be together.

When little Melissa was born to Mary and Giles, Aunt Susan acted as if she were the child's grandmother. She made little dresses for the baby and pieced a pretty quilt to keep her warm at night. Jim arrived two years later. He was strong and was soon toddling all over the yard. Very different was baby George. He was only two months old when the children caught the whooping cough. Melissa and Jim got over the disease quickly, but not so this latest, most delicate baby. He coughed till his little lips turned blue, and Mary feared he was dying.

It was at times like these that it was such a comfort to Mary to have Giles with her. He would hold the puny baby in his strong arms, and the heat of his own body seemed to have a soothing effect on the racking cough. But now Giles was gone. As the dreadful truth came home anew to the young mother, great sobs shook her. Why did he have to die? Surely nothing could be worse!

Those were bad times. The Southern States had seceded from the Union. There was war, a dreadful war where brother fought against brother. Carver's sympathies were with the North, for he hoped Lincoln and his armies would win the war and free the slaves. In the meantime, lawless bushwhackers raided the border country, robbing those who were not strong enough to withstand them and carrying off whatever slaves and animals they could find. The slaves were then sold in Louisiana or Texas for fantastic prices that further enriched the raiders.

One afternoon Moses Carver brought a message of fear to Aunt Susan and Mary: "I was told in town that the bushwhackers have been making forays into the country not far from here. If they should come to our farm, Mary, you must flee as fast as you can with the children to the cave that I have dug under the milkhouse. If they were to capture you, I don't know what I'd do, my child."

One dark night, Moses heard the sound of horses galloping toward his little farm. Instantly, he knew what that meant. He jumped from his bed and, pulling on his trousers over his night clothes, he

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hurried out to Mary's cabin and shook her.

"Wake up, Mary. The bandits are here. Take the children and flee to the cave," he commanded as he threw a quilt around Melissa's shoulders.

"What's the mat—" Mary began.

"Don't ask questions. Obey me. Take the children and run to the cave under the milkhouse, and don't you dare come out until we call you," he ordered as he gave her a push toward the door.

He wasn't a minute too soon. Mary had barely had time to close the trapdoor when the band of masked raiders turned into the yard. They hammered on the kitchen door threatening to break it down if it wasn't opened immediately. As Carver unlocked it for them, they pushed their way inside.

"Where's your money?" they demanded.

Moses had worked many years for every cent he owned, and he was not about to give his hard-earned cash to these ruffians.

When Moses refused to talk, the leader barked a command. "We'll soon unloose that stubborn tongue of yours," he growled as his henchmen grabbed the man.

They dragged him outside and strung him up by his thumbs to a branch of the walnut tree. They whipped him, but he kept his lips pressed together and refused to tell his secret. Then they took a flaming firebrand and held it under his feet burning his soles cruelly.

Moses had locked his valuable horses in their hidden corral, deep in the woods. The animals smelled the searing flesh, and sensing danger, they stampeded within the walls of their enclosure, but they couldn't break through the fence. The bandits heard the noise and thought it was the militia coming. Fearing they'd be caught in a trap, they jumped back onto their horses and fled.

As a last gesture of revenge, they threw the torch into the barn, and soon the wooden building and dry hay were ablaze.

After the men had gone, Aunt Susan hurried out and cut her husband down. She tried to carry him, but it was too much for her frail strength, so instead she helped him to hobble to the house, where he collapsed exhausted onto the bed.

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"But they didn't get my money," he said grimly. Indeed, who would have thought to look for money under the beehives that stood at one side of the garden! "Go and call Mary," he moaned as he lapsed into unconsciousness.

Aunt Susan treated her husband's wounds as best she could, applying soothing poultices. Gradually, his feet healed, and he was able to make his way around painfully.

Melissa and Jim were none the worse for the night's experience, but wee George's cough was much aggravated. Aunt Susan made up a mixture of herbs and honey, and whenever the little one had a choking spell, his mother made him swallow a teaspoon of the syrup, enabling him to breathe once more.

"I have a feeling in my bones that we haven't seen the last of those bushwhackers," Uncle Moses told the women one afternoon. "They'll be back, and they'll take what they can find. I just hope they don't find you, Mary. You must be ready to run to the cave at any moment. I don't intend to wait for them in this house again!"

And he was only too correct. It was a cold, blustery night when the wind brought the dreaded sounds to Carver's ears—ears that seemed to be listening even in his sleep. He sent Aunt Susan to the milkhouse, then hobbled in to call Mary.

"They're here, Mary. Hurry!" he urged.

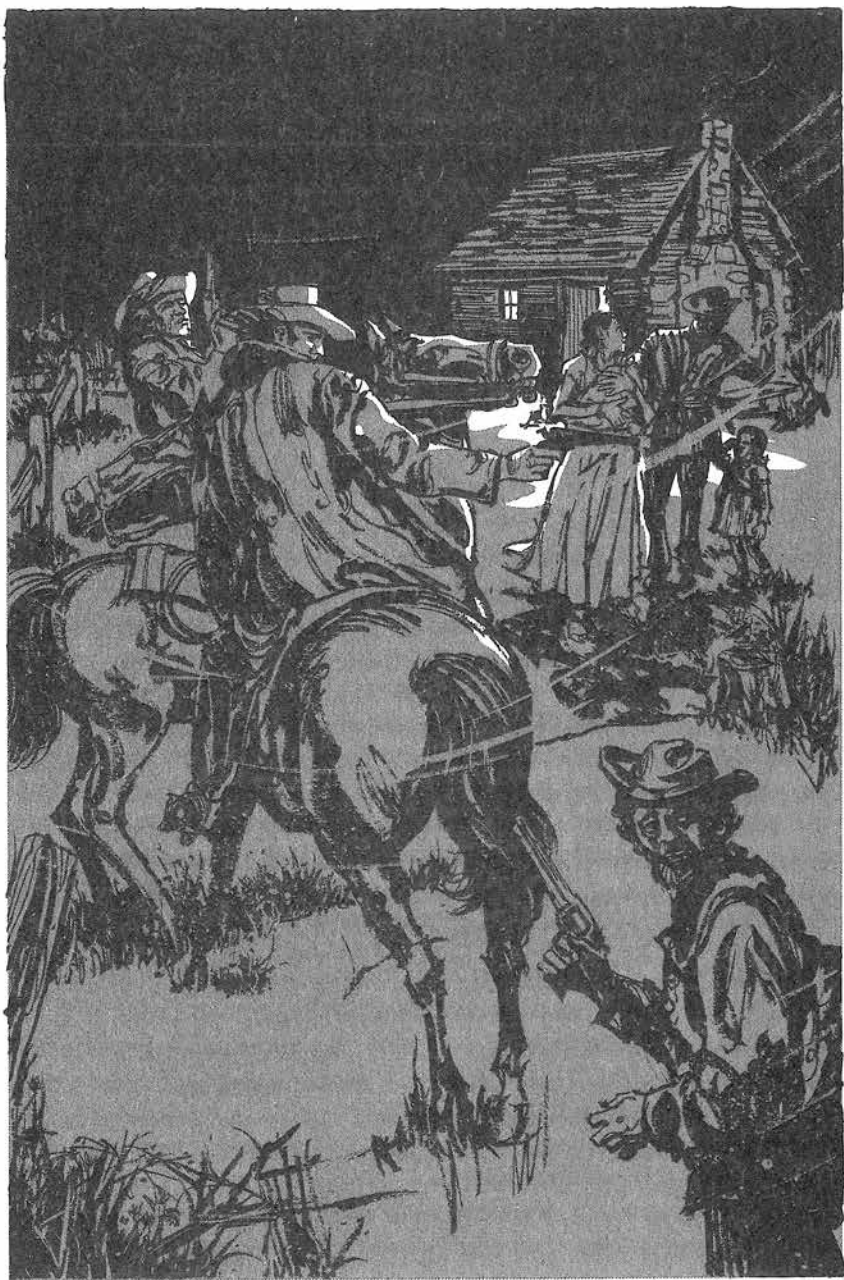
"But, Uncle Moses, it's so cold for George—"

"Grab a blanket and come. I'll take the other two." The man stooped to pick up the children, one in each arm. Jim opened one eye, then snuggled down against the man's warm neck, but Melissa was difficult. She was afraid and clung to her mother's skirt.

"Come, Mary, come," pleaded the man.

"You go; I'll follow," she answered as she picked up the sleeping baby. Should she take the bottle of cough mixture? She walked toward the table, but seemed to forget what she wanted and turned to fetch a blanket. She moved as in a nightmare, unable to do anything quickly. She hesitated one minute too long. The masked riders burst into the little cabin and grabbed her.

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The men weren't interested in a baby. They dragged her, still clutching her little George close, and flung her onto a horse. They hoisted Melissa in front of her and took off into the night.

Uncle Moses and Aunt Susan huddled in the cave with tiny Jim and waited for Mary to follow them. When they heard the *thud, thud* of the hoofbeats, they knew it was too late. Anxiously, they waited till all was quiet once more; then they hurried back to the house. Uncle Moses called, "Mary! Mary!" But only the soft echo came back to him. The door of her cabin swung back and forth in the cold wind, and the room was empty.

Moses Carver was distraught. He blamed himself for Mary's capture. "If only I hadn't bought her, she'd have been safe on Colonel Grant's plantation. They wouldn't dare attack him, for he has too many slaves for them to tackle. But they thought they could get me since I work alone," he repeated time and again.

In the morning, Uncle Moses remembered John Bentley, an ex-bushwhacker. He went straight to Diamond Grove and found the man.

"If you can find my Mary and her children, I'll give you forty acres of my best timberland," he promised Bentley.

"But I have no way of following them," Bentley argued.

"I'll give you my best racehorse, Pacer, to ride. Only find Mary for me," Carver pleaded.

"Very well, I'll do my best," the man agreed.

It was the week before Christmas, but there were no Christmas preparations that year in the Carver home. Neither Aunt Susan nor Uncle Moses had any heart for Christmas. Carver cursed himself for a fool. He had given an ex-bushwhacker a three hundred dollar racer to find Mary! Of course, he would never bring back the girl. Pacer was a good horse and valuable, but he was nothing compared with Mary, Melissa, and that sickly, but lovable little George. That was a sad, sad week and a sad, sad Christmas with only the presence of young Jim to comfort them. Would they never see the rest of their little family again? Every time they thought about it, Aunt Susan burst into tears, and Uncle Moses had to blow his nose vigorously.