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An Extraordinary Dining Experience

Kym Smith

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I had just moved into a beautiful, new home in Delaware City on the Delaware River. The house was rumored to have been a station on the Underground Railroad during the 1800s. This rumor just added to the excitement and charm this old house held for me.

I was in the process of knocking out a wall on the lower floor. On the other side of the wall was an annex attached to the house. At some point the room had been closed off by this wall. I couldn't wait to see what was on the other side. I wondered if there might be some hidden treasure placed there during the Civil War. The time of the Civil War had always held a bit of fascination for me and I was holding my breath as, bit by

bit, I tore the wall down. Throughout the demolition of this wall I thought I kept hearing some muffled sound. I assumed it was a television set left on by the children in some room in another part of the house.

An Extraordinary Dining Experience

by Kym Smith

As I broke through the last little bit of that wall, I gasped in fright! There before me was a short, black woman about five-feet tall just standing there staring at me. She was a little frightened too, I think. She stood with her hand in the pocket of her skirt and peered at me hard, as if the sudden light was hurting her eyes. This small woman had a broad face, a large scar across her forehead, and, in spite of her fear, she

had very warm, kind eyes. She had a red bandana wrapped around her head, partially hiding that terrible scar. She wore a long, dark skirt and blouse. Both of them were tattered and dirty. We stared at each other for what seemed like a very long time, but must have been only a moment.

As my eyes became accustomed to the dark, I glanced around the room. It was small, scarcely six feet by eight feet, and was dimly lit by two well used candles. There was a door in one corner and a pile of rags in another. I noticed an old torn Bible lying on the rags and beneath them what appeared to be the remnants of a chain. The woman's sudden words made me turn my attention back to her.

"Are you a friend?" she asked, eyeing me suspiciously. I know she was startled by my clothing: cutoffs and a tank top. "Have you brought me a message?" she asked.

I was frightened but mumbled that I was a friend--I surely did not want any problems with this strange little woman standing in my house. I kept thinking to myself that I had seen this wizened little face somewhere before. Suddenly it came to me! This was Harriet Tubman! When I had read about her a long time ago, she had fascinated me, and I could never forget her appearance.

"You're Harriet Tubman aren't you?" I asked her.

"Who wants to know?" she asked, pulling a pistol from her skirt pocket. I could tell she had done this many times, as that gun came up in her hand easily. I assured her that I was a friend, that I didn't want to hurt her, and that I would be more than happy to help her in any way that I could.

After a few minutes of eyeing each other suspiciously, we both smiled and I knew she too began to wonder what was happening to us. She slipped the gun back into her pocket and breathed deeply; I had won her trust somehow.

"I thinks bof of us ain't from the same times, duzen't you?" she asked, with another funny look at my clothing. "Mr Lincoln says it done be 1857 and I sho believes him, don't you?" I nodded in astonishment.

"I 'spose you could set down and res' yoself and join me for some food," she said graciously. We both sat down on the packed dirt floor, and I was relieved because I wasn't sure that my shaking legs would have held me up for very much longer. She handed me a plate of rice and red beans.

"It ain't much. My friends lef dis here fo' me fo' supper. They knowed I was acomin' tonight. It might be jus' a little bit col'."

"Thank you," I mumbled, "Where are you going?"

She answered me as she ate her food. "Well, I was a headin' down south. I's gwine to see some folks down dere."

"Can you tell me about yourself?" I asked.

"Well, what you want to know chile?" she answered. I asked her to tell me where she was born and she seemed eager to give me the information.

"I was born in Dorchester County, Maryland, on the Brodas plantation.¹ My ma and pa still there--and my husband," she said with a bit of a smile.

"Tell me about your husband," I said.

"Well, I guess he ain't my husband no more. He done took hisself another woman after I left the Brodas place. He didn't wanna come with me when I left.

I couldn't even tell him when I left, he say he turn me in when-ever I talk about it. He thought leavin' was such foolishness. 'Cause he was free, he weren't no slave.² I guess he jes didn't understand. So after I left, he took hisself another woman fo' a wife.³ So, I just drop him outta my heart like he drop me outta his."

"When was that, when did you escape?"

"Oh, it been' bout twelve years now I reckon. It was right after the young massa died.⁴ When I was younger de old massa died and a man come to run things cause de young massa too young to run de place. After dat de young massa died and de slaves talk lots 'bout us being sold south. Real soon he sold two of my sisters south with de chain gang and I knowed dat I had to go.⁵ I tried to go and take two of my brothers wid me but dey wanna go back so dey take me wid them.⁶ But I knowed I would still go. One day I found out the new massa, Doc Thompson, done sold me south, so I knowed I had to go dat night in 1845. Dere was one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death; if I couldn't have one I'd have the other; for no man'd take me alive; I'd fight fo' my liberty as long as my strength lasted, and when de time came for me to go, de Lord would let dem take me.⁷ I had to go dat very night. I wanna tell someone I's going', so I go up to de big house to tell my sister Mary, but de new massa come by so we couldn't talk. So's I sing and let her know I's leavin'."

"What did you sing?" I asked.

"Oh I sing,

"When that old chariot comes,
I'm going to leave you,
I'm bound for the
promised land,
Friends, I'm going to
leave you.

I'm sorry, friends, to leave
you,
Farewell! Oh, farewell!
But I'll meet you in the
morning,
Farewell! Oh farewell!

I'll meet you in the
morning,
When I reach the
promised land;
On the other side of
Jordan,
For I'm bound for the
promised land."⁸

"I sing dat song so Mary knows I'm agoin'. De new massa, he look at me kinda funny.⁹ So's I wait till John Tubman 'sleep and I pack up some ash cake an' salt herring in a head rag an' I left.¹⁰ I went to dis white woman's house. She don' tole me she would hep me ifin I ever needed hep.¹¹ So's I went to her house. Dis woman wrote some names on a piece of paper and tol' me dese places to stop. She tol' me dese folks would feed me and git me to de next safe place.¹² I found out dis was the Underground Railroad. De folks back home, dey talk 'bout de Under-

ground Railroad. I thought it was a real train dat folks could get on." She smiled a little at this.¹³

"So you started your journey north from there?"

"Yes."

"How did you find your way?"

"I jes took off and followed de North Star. I stopped at de places de white lady tol' me about. Dey gave me food and a place to sleep. I kept goin' and finally reached dat line to freedom. When I found I had crossed dat line, I looked at my hand to see if I was de same person. Dere was such a glory ober de fields and I felt like I was in Heben."¹⁴

"What was it like growing up on the plantation?"

"Oh, dat was a long time ago."

"When were you born?"

"I ain't really sure. I think it was 'bout 1820, or '21 near as I can figure.¹⁵ My ma and pa didn't know how to read or write. Was 'gainst de law to teach a slave to read or write.¹⁶ We tol' time by de seasons, by things dat happened."

"Where are your parents now?" I asked.

"Oh they still back in Dorchester County. I's goin' to try to git dem out dis time.¹⁷ My ma's name Harriet Green. My pa called Ben Ross. Dey don't call me Harriet till I grewed up sum. Wen I was little dey called me Minty. My name was Arminta Ross."¹⁸

"What was your life like on the plantation?"

"I was jes a little girl. Ma

and Pa used to work in de fields and me and de other chi'ren used to play in front of de quarters. Sometimes we hept pick fruit from de trees and get de chicken eggs. We took dem to de big house. We didn't eat dat food. We et salt pork or salt fish an' corn meal mush or taters.¹⁹ Dis old woman watched us while my ma and pa worked de fields. She was pretty mean. She jes sat dere watching us and she was always suckin' on an old pipe with nuthin' in it. She watched us to make sure we din't drown in de crik, git los' in de woods or get hurt. She was ole but she could sure use a switch. Sometimes she tole us stories 'bout Middle Passage, she called it. We din't know what it was but we was sure scart.²⁰ When I was 'bout five, de old massa hired me out to be a baby nurse fo' a woman. She named Mis Susan. De first thing dey tol' me to do was to sweep an' dust, but I didn' know how. I dusted de furniture de way dey say and den I sweep de flo' and de dust done git right back on de furniture an' Miss Susan, she whip me. I 'posed to be de baby nurse an I rock de baby. If'n I fall asleep, she whip me fo dat too. After while Miss Susan thinks I too dumb to learn anything, so she take me back to Massa Brodas."²¹

"After dat, Massa took me to work for Mr. and Miz Cook. He trapped de muskrats to sell de skin an Miz Cook, she gonna teach me to weave de cloth. I kept gettin' my fingers stuck in de yarn. Miz Cook done think I's too stupid to weave de cloth, so's

I go to work for Mr. Cook tendin' de traps in de criks and de marshes.²² Den one day I got so sick, dey thinks I's gwine to die, so dey send fo' my pa to bring me home.²³ After I got well, Massa hired me out as a baby nurse again. One day I saw somethin'. Dey was little chunks of sugar. I wanted to taste one of dem. De mistress saw me take one. She whipped me an' sent me back to Massa Brodas.²⁴ Massa Brodas figgered I couldn't work in a house no mo' so he let me work in de fields wit' my pa. I worked real hard. Den one day I was shuckin' de corn in de barn an another slave tried to sneak away. De oberseer, he saw him and tried to go after him wid de whip. I stood in de do' and de overseer pick up de lead weight fo' weighing of things and he threw it at de other slave an' it hit me in de haid."²⁵

At this point, Harriet was rubbing the scar that was on her forehead. "You can still see where he hit my haid. I gets dese spells sometimes and I jes' goes to sleep fo' a spell. But, jes' fo' a few minutes, den I wakes up.²⁶ It scared me when I runned away. I was afeared I would have a spell an' dey would find me. But, I jes' tol' de Lord I would hol' on tight to him if'n he would see me through, an' he did."

"What did you do when you finally made it, and you were free?" I asked.

Her reply was a description of how she got to Philadelphia, got a job in a hotel kitchen, and saved all of the money that she could so that she could go back and get her family out of the

South.²⁷

"When I saved enuf money, I go to see dis man and dey tol' me that his name was William Still. He tol' me dey gwine to sell my sister Mary an' her chi'ren.²⁸ I tol' Mr. Still dat I had to go back an' git my sister outta Maryland. He tol' me about a new law called de Fugitive Slave Law.²⁹ He tol' me dis new law say I can be arrested even in de North. I asked him where be a safe place to take my family and he tol' me dey be safe in Canada in a place called St. Catherines (now known as Ontario, Canada)."

"I knowed I was gwine to have hard times, but I had to make dis trip. Dat was de first trip I made back to de South. When I got my sister, her husband an' her children, I took dem to St. Catherines in Canada."³⁰

"I can understand why you went back to get your family out, but why did you go back for so many others? If they had caught you, you surely would have been killed." I said to her. "Weren't you afraid to keep going back?"

Harriet answered, "Well, Missus, t'wasn't me, 'twas de Lord! I always tol' him, I trust to you. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I 'spect you to lead me, and he always did.³¹ I ben a slave an' I knowed what it was like. I gotta go back to git out as many of my people as I can. I don't trust Uncle Sam wid dem no longer. I gotta take dem to Canada. 'Sides, if dey catch me, I gotta pistol. I will shoot myself before I let dem take me back."³²

"When you are traveling with people do they ever want to turn back?" I asked.

"Sometimes dey do want to go back, but I can't let dem. Once dey meet up wid me, dey know too much. I don't go back to de plantations. I stay 'bout ten miles away, so if dey get caught or if dey change dere minds, I can still go. Once dey meet up wid me, dey go all de way."

"Sometimes dey try to take me back, but I tells dem 'Dead niggers tell no tales' and I tells dem I will shoot dem, cause I have my pistol."³³

"Have you ever had to shoot anyone?" I asked.

"No, I ain't never had to but I will ifin I has to. Ifin dey go back de Massa will whip dem until dey tell 'em 'bout me."

I asked her many questions. "Have they ever come close to catching you?"

"Sometimes we can hear dem on de road. We can see dem puttin' up de advertisements fo' us on de fences and de trees. An' when dey gone, we jes' laugh. We was de fools and dey was de wise men, but we wasn't fools enuf' to go down de high road in de broad daylight.³⁴ We usually sleeps during de day and den walks through de forests at night. 'Course I can't make dat many trips cause it costs a lot of money."

"How many trips south have you made?" I asked.

"Well, I reckon I made 'bout sebenteen or eighteen near as I can figger."

"Where do you get the money and what do you use it for on the road?" was the next ques-

tion that I wanted her to answer.

"I git de money mostly from working, but I gits some from other persons too.³⁵ Dey is friends of mine and dey gives me some of dere money. I 'member de one time some persons helped me an' I din't have anymo' money, so I gib dem some of my underclothes to pay for dere kindness."³⁶ She snickered a little at her statement.

"Well, how do you travel so you don't get caught, and what special things do you do?" I asked.

"Well, we trable only at night and find a place to sleep in de day. We leabe on a Saturday night so's de massas don't generally know dat anyones done gone til' Monday morning and den dey don't git de advertisements out til' Tuesday, so by den we been gone fo' three days.³⁷ When I leaves de group fo' somethin, and den when I come back, I sings so dey knows it's me comin'."³⁸

I had a number of questions that I still wanted her to answer before this wonderful time began to slip away from us.

"How many people have you brought out of the south? Do you think there will always be slaves?"

She quietly replied, "I don't know, I think 'bout two or three hundred persons, but dere's lots more peoples dere.³⁹ Dere is only one way to free all slaves. We must make war against de slave owners and win.⁴⁰ I's gwine to hep my friend John Brown to get some people to hep fight."

I proceeded to tell her a little about how the Civil War

and the end of slavery came about. She listened intently and then said, "Maybe God sent you to tell me so's I know I'm doin' the right thing."

Harriet seemed to believe that God was leading her. I left the room that night and built the wall back. I've never heard her there again.

On long, warm summer nights, I think about this experience and the wonderful feelings I had for this woman who did so much good in her life. It often makes me feel inadequate. I remember choosing not to tell her about John Brown and Harper's Ferry, as I knew she had gotten sick and was unable to be there. I can still remember her soft words saying, "On my Underground Railroad, I never ran my train off de track and I never los' a passenger."

Notes

¹ Ann Petry, *Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 1.

² Petry, p. 74.

³ Petry, pp. 108-109.

⁴ Sam and Beryl Epstein, *Harriet Tubman: Guide to Freedom* (Champaign, Illinois: Garrard Publishing Company, 1968), p. 40.

⁵ Epstein, p. 40.

⁶ Sara Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), p. 16.

⁷ Bradford, p. 21.

⁸ Bradford, pp. 18-19.

⁹ Bradford, p. 18.

¹⁰ Petry, p. 88.

¹¹ Epstein, pp. 40-41.

¹² Petry, p. 89.

¹³ Petry, p. 89.

¹⁴ Bradford, p. 14.

¹⁵ Bradford, p. 73.

¹⁶ Frederick Douglas, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglas* (Secaucus, N. J.: Citadel Press, 1983), p. 70.

¹⁷ Epstein, pp. 168-169.

¹⁸ Petry, p. 11.

¹⁹ Epstein, p. 13.

²⁰ Petry, p. 12.

²¹ Bradford, pp. 10-13.

²² Petry, pp. 30-34.

²³ Epstein, p. 23.

²⁴ Epstein, p. 27.

²⁵ Petry, pp. 56-58.

²⁶ William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1970), p. 306.

²⁷ Charles L. Blockson, *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), p. 119.

²⁸ Petry, pp. 96-99.

²⁹ Petry, pp. 96-99.

³⁰ Bradford, p. 77.

³¹ Bradford, p. 35.

³² Epstein, p. 56.

³³ Blockson, p. 121.

³⁴ Bradford, p. 25.

³⁵ Bradford, pp. 50-52.

³⁶ Bradford, p. 50.

³⁷ Blockson, p. 121.

³⁸ Bradford, p. 25.

³⁹ Epstein, p. 80.

⁴⁰ Epstein, p. 77.

