

"Ann Wood, where are you going?" Tilda, a house servant, demanded of the young black ladies' maid who was tiptoeing from the feasting and dancing on the lawn of the Wood plantation in Virginia.

Ann, only sixteen, knew Tilda was critical of her because she enjoyed the company of the field hands who were her own age. Usually Ann laughed at Tilda's scoldings, but on this day she must be careful not to annoy her.

It was Christmas Eve, 1855, and the Woods' slaves were congregated at the big house for the only celebration they were allowed all year.

"Where *are* you going, Ann?" Tilda repeated.

"Why, I'm—I'm going to visit Muffin and her pups in the barn," Ann replied. Satisfied, Tilda turned away, and Ann made herself walk casually in case someone else might suspect her leaving the food and dancing.

Reaching the barn, Ann quietly crept around to the back where an open field cart was hidden.

"Shucks, you scared me, Ann," young Fred said from behind the cart.

"Shh—Want 'em to hear us, Fred? We've got to wait here quiet as mice till the others can break away from the dancing."

At last, arriving one by one, the four other young slaves daring to make this midnight escape had made their way to the barn.

"Well, this is it," sighed Ann as she and Fred hitched up the horses.

Ann climbed into the wagon, reached under the seat, and brought out the weapons she had stolen and hidden during the past months; three double-barreled pistols and four

long daggers. She gave a pistol or a dagger to each member of the group; for herself she kept both a pistol and a dagger.

"Probably won't need 'em, but just in case . . ."

"Giddap, giddap," she called softly, and the wagon began moving. "We're goin'," she whispered jubilantly. "We gotta make Leesburg 'fore light and meet Robert Purvey, an old friend to Uncle Solomon. He'll hide us all day in his barn and let us sleep in the hay."

The sky was just turning gray as Ann drove the wagon into the Purvey farmyard. Robert Purvey and his wife, Susan, hurried out to the exhausted travelers and helped Ann drive into the barn. The youths slept there during the day. Then toward evening the fugitive wagon moved off quickly, for it had to reach the second underground station in Frederick, Maryland, before morning.

Suddenly from the distance came the rhythm of galloping horses and the baying of a hound.

There was no point in trying to outdistance the posse, since they couldn't race the riders in a clumsy loaded wagon.

"Whoa, whoa." Ann's voice trembled as she pulled them to a halt and leaped from the wagon, Nat close behind her. "Knives and guns, all of you," she commanded. "Hold the horses, Tom."

They were hardly in their places when the five men pulled up behind them, jumped from their horses, and raced toward them. Each man carried a long rifle, which he pointed at the runaways.

"Thought you were smart, giving us the slip and getting all the way to Maryland," a

stranger with a sheriff's badge sneered. "Get over here, you," he snarled at Nat, moving toward him.

Standing beside the back of the wagon, Ann raised her right arm and leveled the pistol at the nearest man. Trembling with anger and fear, she waved her dagger.

The man hesitated at the sight of this bold young woman who had the nerve to threaten him.

"Shoot! Afraid?" she dared them. She was gambling, but she knew the posse didn't want to kill them because you couldn't sell a dead slave on the market.

Suddenly Nat fired a shot and wounded one of the men in the leg.

"Well, I'll be—you baggage!" he screamed in pain.

As the posse backed away from the six young fugitives, Ann fired her pistol into the ground at their feet and the men stumbled onto their horses.

"We'll be back!" they shouted as they wheeled and galloped away.

Ann's legs nearly collapsed as relief coursed through her. "Gotta move fast, because they'll be back. But—Maryland—we're in Maryland—did you hear them say?"

In the growing light, Ann pointed toward a wooded area not too far away.

"Most likely hidin' place I see," she stated

in a flat voice.

A short time later the horses were moving slowly through the woods as the boys followed behind, covering the horse and wagon tracks. They took turns keeping guard while the other five slept and then decided to lie in their hiding place through the next night.

The second evening after their triumph over the posse, Ann drove the wagon out into open country.

"We'll get to Frederick by morning," she announced.

Stations of the underground railroad harbored them in Frederick and Hagerstown, Maryland, and in other towns along the way.

Three weeks after their escape from the plantation, Ann Wood drove the faithful horses into Philadelphia. By arrangement with underground "conductors," they were greeted by Thomas Garrett, a white Quaker, and William Still, a free Negro.

"And Ann dared them to fire at you?" their listeners marveled that first evening in Philadelphia. "Astonishing! But who planned the scheme for you to escape?"

"Ann Wood," Nat promptly volunteered.

"Not me, not me alone," Ann interrupted. "Uncle Solomon and Fannie's ma and Jen—didn't want us sold. Risked whippin' or worse to help us all slip out. Now, thank God, we're here, safe in Philadelphia. Wish they could know."

## CHECK YOUR READING

1. **Tilda was critical of Ann Wood because Ann**
  - A was only sixteen
  - B was a ladies' maid
  - C made friends with the field hands
  
2. **The only celebration the slaves were allowed all year was on**
  - A Christmas Eve
  - B New Year's Day
  - C Thanksgiving Day
  
3. **Ann knew it was suspicious for her to**
  - A visit Muffin and her puppies
  - B leave the food and dancing
  - C go outside the house
  
4. **The number of slaves planning to escape was**
  - A six
  - B four
  - C seven
  
5. **The runaways left at**
  - A dawn
  - B around midnight
  - C during the afternoon
  
6. **The posse had been sent after the runaways to**
  - A frighten them into returning
  - B bring them back dead or alive
  - C forcefully take them back
  
7. **The men in the posse would not shoot the slaves because**
  - A the slaves were valuable property
  - B the slaves were armed
  - C they might hang for murder
  
8. **The runaway slaves were helped by**
  - A white abolitionists
  - B other slaves on the plantation
  - C Both A and B
  
9. **Philadelphia had many abolitionists because**
  - A many Quakers lived there
  - B it was a large city
  - C it was a city of great wealth
  
10. **Uncle Solomon and the others planned this escape because they**
  - A didn't want the teenagers sold
  - B thought slavery was unjust
  - C Both A and B