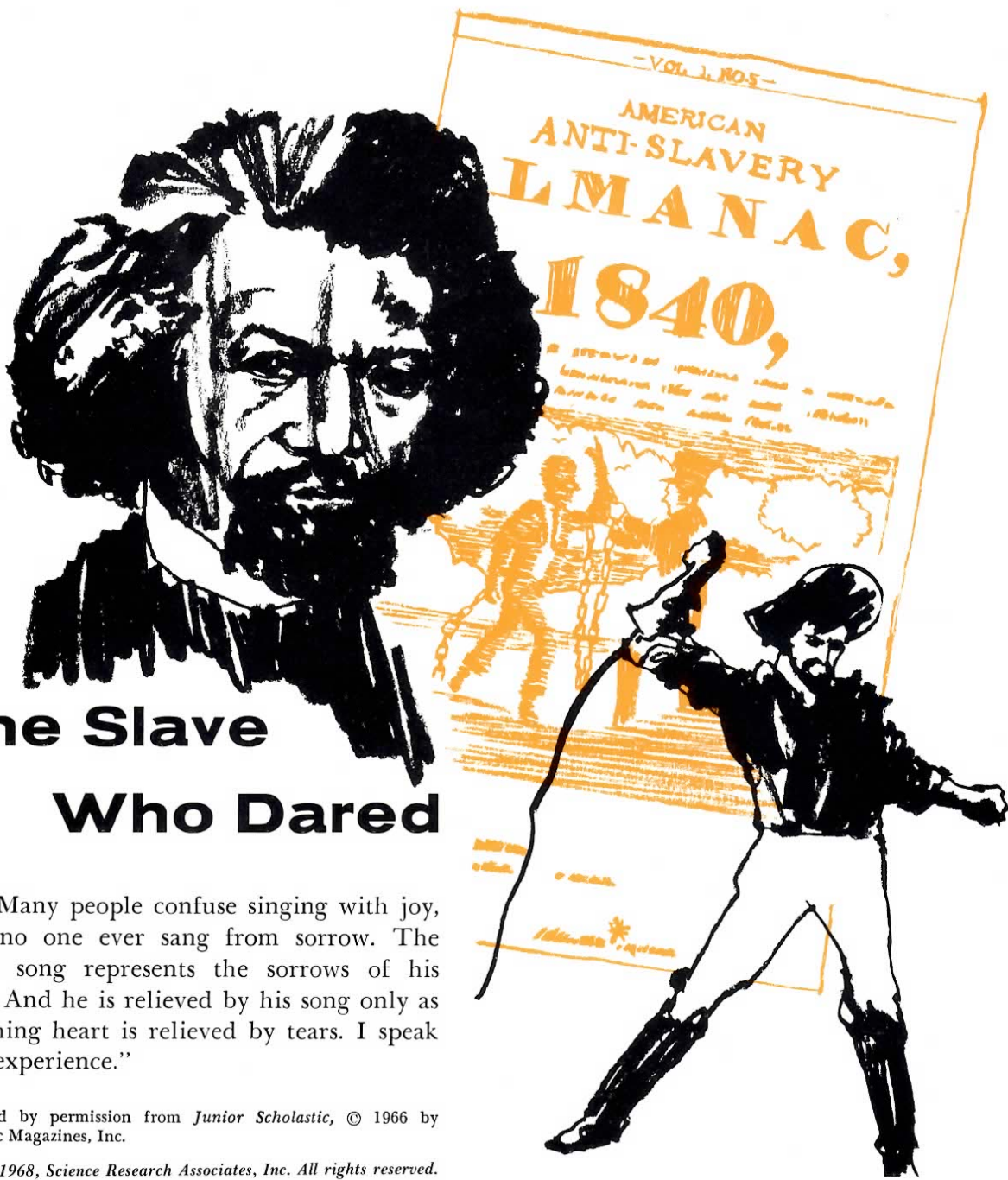


The Slave Who Dared

"Many people confuse singing with joy, as if no one ever sang from sorrow. The slave's song represents the sorrows of his heart. And he is relieved by his song only as an aching heart is relieved by tears. I speak from experience."

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Frederick Douglass was speaking at an antislavery meeting in Nantucket, Massachusetts. To the thousand or more people there, he was describing what it meant to be a slave.

The twenty-four-year-old Douglass had made his first speech only the day before. The man who was supposed to speak had been beaten up, and Douglass had volunteered to take his place.

In that year, 1841, it was dangerous for any Negro to talk against slavery. For Douglass it was doubly dangerous, because he was an escaped slave. Many slaveowners hired men to search for runaways and bring them back. Douglass had no way of spotting the slave catchers, but they might easily recognize him. The more often he was seen on a lecture platform, the more likely it was that he would be seized.

In spite of the danger, he kept on with his speechmaking. One thing, however, bothered him: many people in his audiences did not believe that he had really been a slave. Perhaps it was because he spoke so well and knew so much. It was obvious that he had had an education—very unusual for a Negro at that time.

Douglass realized that if his message was to do any good, he would have to convince the world that he was telling the truth. There was only one thing to do, and he had the courage to do it. He wrote a book, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. It told frankly and movingly the entire story of his life. It also, of course, gave any slave catcher all the information he needed.

Douglass had been born in 1817 on a Maryland plantation. His mother was Harriet

Bailey, a Negro slave who had some Indian blood. He never knew his father.

As a boy, Frederick worked in the fields along with the other slaves. When he was ten, he was sent to Baltimore to live with relatives of his owner. This was a stroke of luck. The lady of the house taught him the alphabet, and Frederick learned to read and write. Although the lessons did not last long, he kept on studying in secret. Then, however, his owner died, and he was sent back to the plantation. He and the other slaves were divided among the owner's relatives. Frederick saw many slave families broken up. The mother would be sent to one faraway place, the father to another, and the children to still others. This heartbreaking experience made up Frederick's mind once and for all. He determined that he would win his freedom somehow.

His chance came in 1838 when he was twenty-one. He was working in a shipyard in Baltimore. One day he slipped away from his overseers, put on a sailor's uniform, and borrowed some sailor's papers. Then he simply walked out and boarded a train for New York. There he met his sweetheart, Anne Murray, a free Negro. They married and, with the help of the Underground Railroad, escaped to Bedford, Massachusetts. The Underground Railroad was a secret network of stations set up to help slaves to escape.

Northern leaders were forming antislavery societies to convince more people that slavery ought to be ended, and Douglass joined this movement. That's how he came to be a speaker and eventually to write his book.

He knew that he was not likely to remain free very long once the book was published. So as soon as it came out, he went to England. He stayed abroad for two years, meeting and talking with English people who opposed slavery. They collected a fund for him—enough to buy his freedom from his owner and start a newspaper. And that is what he did when he returned home in 1847. He called the paper the *North Star*—for the bright star that guided escaping slaves on their journey north.

By the time the Civil War started, Douglass was widely known. President Lincoln asked him to the White House. On that

visit Douglass convinced the President that Negroes would make good soldiers in the Union Army. He himself helped recruit the 54th and 55th Massachusetts Negro regiments. Among the first volunteers were his own two sons.

After the war Douglass held several government positions, including that of U.S. minister to Haiti. He continued to speak and work for the rights of the newly freed slaves. Nor did he stop there. He was concerned about anyone who was being denied the rights of a citizen. On the day of his death, February 20, 1895, he attended a meeting whose purpose was to secure voting rights for women.

CHECK YOUR READING

- In his speech (paragraph 1) Douglass pointed out that slaves' songs were**
 - usually very beautiful
 - sad rather than happy
 - proud and courageous
- It was especially dangerous for Douglass to speak against slavery because he was**
 - a Northerner
 - an escaped slave
 - a rich man
- Some people did not believe that Douglass had been a slave, because he**
 - seemed well educated
 - was so young
 - had Indian blood
- To convince people that he had been a slave, Douglass**
 - went to court
 - showed a letter
 - wrote a book
- Douglass learned to read and write when he was**
 - helping in the fields
 - living in Baltimore
 - working in the shipyard
- Douglass' decision to win his freedom was made when he**
 - was badly beaten up
 - saw slave families separated
 - heard of the Underground Railroad
- Douglass escaped from the shipyard by pretending to be a**
 - carpenter
 - slaveowner
 - sailor
- The reason Douglass went to England was to**
 - escape slave catchers
 - publicize his book
 - finance a newspaper
- Douglass helped the Union during the Civil War by**
 - joining the army
 - recruiting Negro soldiers
 - spying in the South
- Shortly before his death, Douglass was working for**
 - equal taxation
 - child labor laws
 - women's rights