



## T H E S N A K E S K I N ' S B A D L U C K

WE SLEPT MOST OF THE DAY AND STARTED TRAVELING AGAIN THAT night. We talked about Cairo and wondered if we would recognize it when we reached it. I said that we might not recognize it in the dark because I had been told that it was a small town with no more than a dozen houses. Jim said that we would surely be able to recognize where a river as large as the Ohio River joined the Mississippi. I wasn't certain about this.

Jim began to worry, but then he thought that he would surely *feel* different when we were near Cairo because he would then be a free man. If we missed Cairo, we would be in slave country again and he would have lost his one chance to be free.

Each time Jim saw even a small light, he began to tremble with excitement. He knew that he was very close to being a free man. Suddenly, I began to tremble as I listened to him talk, for I realized that he *was* almost free, and who was responsible for that? I was. And that thought troubled me. I had never really thought clearly about what I was doing, but now I worried about it more and more. I did not really

steal Jim from Miss Watson, but I knew that he was running away from her and that I should have told someone—I should have stopped him. Miss Watson had never done me harm. She taught me to read; she tried to teach me manners. Why was I helping her lose property that was worth 800 dollars?

Jim talked out loud about freedom, while I worried silently and tried to decide what I should do. Jim said that the first thing that he would do when he was a free man in a Free State was work and save every cent of his money until he had enough to buy his wife out of slavery. Then they would both work until they could buy their two children, or maybe they would get Abolitionists to steal the children for them.

I became sick with guilt when I heard Jim say those words. He would never have dared talk of stealing his children before and was saying that now only because he felt he was almost free. I was helping Jim run away and he was talking about stealing his children—children who belonged to a man that I had never met, a man who had never done me harm.

I was sorry to hear Jim say those words; it was such a lowering of himself. I felt so guilty that I told myself that I would go to shore the first time I saw light and tell someone about Jim. I knew that was the correct thing to do. I felt much better.

After some time, Jim called out, “We’re safe. I see a light and that means we have reached Cairo.”

“I’ll get into the canoe and go to see if we are in Cairo. You could be mistaken.”

Jim got the canoe ready and put his old coat in the bottom for me to sit on. As I began to row, he said, “Soon I’ll be shouting for joy. I’ll owe my freedom to you, Huck. I’ll never forget you; you’re the best friend I’ve ever had. And you’re the *only* friend I have now.”

I was rowing quickly, eager to tell someone that Jim was a run-away slave, but when I heard Jim’s praise of me, I slowed my rowing down. What should I do? I no longer knew.

Jim shouted, “There goes my good friend, Huck, the only white

man who ever kept his promise to old Jim.”

My stomach felt sick when I heard those words. At that moment, a boat approached with two men in it, each holding a gun. I stopped.

One of the men asked, “Is that raft yours?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are there any men on it?”

“Only one, sir.”

“Five black slaves ran away tonight from a man who lives further up the river. Is your man white or black?”

I tried to answer, but the words would not come. I knew what I had planned to say, but I was weakening.

“He’s white.”

“We’ll go to your raft to check for ourselves.”

“I wish you would,” I said quickly. “My Pap is on the raft, along with my mother and sister. They are all very sick with a serious disease that has caused many people to die. No one else has wanted to come near them. Everyone has been frightened about getting the disease.”

The men stopped rowing. I started to cry. “Please, help my family. They’ll all die. Don’t leave like all the others have.”

“We’re sorry to learn about your family, but we don’t want to get sick. Other men will be along soon. Ask them for help but don’t tell them about the sickness in your family. Just stay away from our boat. I’ll float a twenty dollar gold piece to you on a board. I hate to leave you but the money should help.”

The second man said, “Let me add a second twenty dollar gold piece to that board. I hope your family will get better. And if you see any runaway slaves, get help and catch them. We earn a lot of money catching runaway slaves.”

“Good-bye, sirs,” said I. “If I see any runaway slaves, I’ll catch them.”

After they left, I returned to the raft feeling sad; I knew that I had done wrong. But then I said to myself, “Suppose I had done the right thing and told the men about Jim. Would I feel better now? No, I would feel just as guilty as I do now. Whatever I do, I’ll feel guilty. I’m

going to stop worrying.”

I entered the tent on the raft, but Jim wasn't there. I looked everywhere and could not see Jim. I called out, “Jim.”

“Here I am, Huck.” Jim was in the river, with just his nose above the water. I told him that the men were gone and he could return to the raft.

“I listened to what you said to those men, Huck. That was a clever trick.”

I gave Jim one of the twenty dollar gold pieces and he said that was enough money to pay for our boat trip up the Ohio River to freedom. He thought that we were within twenty miles of Cairo, but the night was ending and we had to find a place to hide the raft. We spent the day wrapping our supplies in blankets and tying them together. We had everything prepared for leaving the raft. That night we saw lights from a town, and I rowed the canoe to shore to ask the name of the town. I met a man fishing from his boat and asked, “Is this the town of Cairo?”

“Cairo? No. You must be a fool.”

I returned to the raft. Jim was very disappointed, but I said that I was certain Cairo would be the next town.

We passed another town just before daylight. The town was built on some high hills, but Jim said that the country around Cairo was very flat. We sat through the whole day without talking much. We both knew that something was wrong. We should have reached Cairo by now. Finally I said, “Maybe we passed Cairo in the fog at night.”

“Don't talk about it,” said Jim in the saddest voice that I have ever heard. “I've never had good luck. I suspect that snakeskin is still working its bad luck on us.”

“I wish that I'd never touched that snakeskin, Jim. I wish that I'd never seen it.”

“Don't blame yourself, Huck. You didn't know that snakeskins bring bad luck.”

We talked about the problem. We knew that we couldn't turn the raft around and travel up the river because a raft travels with the

river current—all rafts travel downstream only. All we could do was wait until dark, leave the raft forever, and row the canoe up the river to Cairo. We slept all day hidden in some bushes so that we wouldn't be tired for rowing. When we returned to the raft, the canoe was gone!! Neither of us spoke. We knew that this was more bad luck sent to us by the snakeskin.

We knew that we now had no other choice. We had to continue traveling South, deeper into slave territory. I told Jim that I would buy a canoe with my twenty dollar gold piece just as soon as I found someone who would sell a canoe to me.

The night was very dark; no moon or stars were in the sky. It was the worst kind of night for traveling, almost as bad as traveling in the fog. Suddenly, we saw a huge boat coming toward us. I quickly put a light on our deck and hoped that the captain would see it. At the last moment, before the boat hit us, we heard the captain shout. Jim and I both jumped into the river. I could hear the crash of the big boat against our raft. I stayed very deep in the water because I knew that I could be killed by the huge water wheel that powered the boat. The huge boat continued up the river; the captain never stopped to see if we were hurt.

I called to Jim, but heard no answer. I was able to hold onto a floating log, and swam with it to shore. The river was very wide, and it took a long time before I reached the shore. I had no idea where I was, but I could see a large house nearby. I had planned to walk quietly past the house without awakening anyone, but a large group of dogs ran from the house, barking and showing their teeth, and I knew that I had to stand quietly.