



T H E M E A N E S T T R I C K O F A L L

WE DARED NOT STOP AT ANY TOWN FOR DAYS AND DAYS; WE SIMPLY continued traveling down the river. We were in the Deep South now—a long distance from the town where Peter Wilks had lived—and the weather was hot. The duke and king felt that it was safe to begin to visit small towns along the river again.

In one small town, they gave a speech about the evils of drinking whiskey, but this didn't earn them enough money to buy a bottle of whiskey for themselves. In another small town, they organized a dancing school, but they knew little about dancing and soon the people forced them to leave the town. They tried many other tricks in many other small towns, but with little success. They simply weren't able to earn much money. Finally, they had spent the last of their money and had no more. They simply lay on the raft as we floated down the river, thinking and thinking and never saying a word. That was the first time that we had seen them in such low spirits and without hope.

After several days of this, Jim and I noticed a change in their manner. They would sit together in the small tent on the raft and talk

quietly for two and three hours at a time. We had no idea what they were talking about, but we were very uneasy. We feared that they were planning a new trick of some kind that would be even worse than those that they had played before. Jim and I promised each other that if we ever had the opportunity, we would escape from these two.

Early one morning, we hid the raft in a good, safe place about two miles below a small town named Pikesville. The king went ashore and told us to remain hidden while he went into town to see if there was a way we could earn some money and to learn if anyone had heard about us. He said that if he didn't return by noon, the duke and I would know that it was safe for us to follow him.

We remained on the raft and waited. The duke was angry and complained about everything that Jim and I did. Nothing we did could please him. I was happy when noon finally arrived and we could go to the village to find the king. The duke and I searched for him for quite a while before we found him very drunk in the back room of a store. Other drunks were laughing at him, which made the king very angry, but he was too drunk to do anything about this.

The duke was very angry with the king, and loudly told him so. He called the king an old fool, and the king called the duke names that were even worse. While they were arguing and shouting at each other, I saw my chance to escape and ran as fast as I could to the raft. I knew that this was the opportunity that Jim and I had been waiting for. I knew that if we left without them this time, it would be a long day before they would see Jim and me again.

I reached the raft filled with joy and shouted, "Cut the rope, Jim. We can escape. I ran away from the duke."

But all was quiet; no one answered and no one came out of the tent on the raft. Jim was gone! I shouted and shouted and shouted some more. I ran among the trees and searched everywhere for him. Jim was gone. Then I sat down and cried. I couldn't control my tears.

After a while, I stood up and began to walk toward the town. I met a boy on the road and asked him if he had seen a black man dressed in certain clothes (I described the clothes Jim had been wear-

ing when I last saw him).

He answered, "Yes, I saw him. He's at Silas Phelps's farm two miles from here. He's a runaway slave, and they've caught him. There's a two hundred dollar reward for him, and they'll keep him until they get the reward money."

"Who caught him?"

"An old man—a stranger—he sold his chance to collect the reward to Silas Phelps for only forty dollars. He says that he has to travel up the river and cannot wait to collect the two hundred dollars. Can you imagine not waiting for two hundred dollars?"

"I wonder why he was willing to sell his chance for the reward for only forty dollars. That's very cheap. Are you certain that the reward is lawful?"

"It is. I saw the printed notice myself. The notice describes the runaway slave exactly. And it tells the name of his owner in New Orleans."

I returned to the raft and sat in the tent to think. I couldn't decide what I should do. I thought and thought, but couldn't see how to solve this new problem. After all this long journey, and after all Jim and I had done for the duke and the king, I couldn't believe that they played such a mean trick on Jim. How could they have caused Jim to become a slave again—after his months of freedom—for forty dirty dollars!

I said to myself that it would be a thousand times better for Jim to return to Miss Watson, so I decided to write a letter to Tom Sawyer asking him to tell Miss Watson where she could find Jim. But then I thought about this a second time. I knew that Jim would be hated for having run away and he would probably be sold down the river to New Orleans anyway. Also, when my old friends discovered that I helped Jim escape, I wouldn't be able to feel comfortable around them anymore.

So many thoughts were in my mind at the same time that I couldn't decide what to do. I tried to pray, but I couldn't find the right words to use. I knew that the correct thing to do would be to return Jim to Miss Watson and I knew that I should pray for help to do this. But I also knew deep down inside of me that I would never be able to

do this to Jim, and I knew that God knew I wouldn't be able to do this. A person can't pray a lie—I learned that.

I felt so troubled and didn't know what I should do. Then I had an idea. Perhaps if I wrote a letter to Miss Watson, I would feel better and my troubles would be gone. I got a piece of paper and a pencil and wrote:

Miss Watson:

Your runaway slave Jim is two miles below Pikesville on the Mississippi River. Mr. Silas Phelps has him and will return him to you for a two hundred dollar reward.

Huck Finn

Suddenly, I felt good, as though I had been washed clean. Then I began to think about the trip Jim and I had taken down the river. I could see Jim in my mind—Jim in the day and in the night, Jim in the moonlight and Jim in a storm. Sometimes we were talking or singing or laughing. All I could remember were the good things Jim had done for me and how he had said that I was the best friend that he had in the world. And then I thought again of the letter that I had just written, and my hands began to shake. I knew that I had to decide forever between two things. I thought for a moment, almost without breathing, and then said to myself, "I don't care if I go to hell"—and tore the letter into many pieces.

Those were awful thoughts and awful words, but they were said. I knew that I wouldn't change my mind again. I knew that I had to begin to work on a plan for stealing Jim out of slavery. I decided to sleep on the raft. The next morning, after breakfast, I put on my best clothes, got into the canoe, and rowed to the shore. I hid the canoe and began to search for the Phelps farm.

I walked along a road and soon passed a mill with a sign on it that said, "Phelps's Sawmill." When I came to a farmhouse near the mill, I could see no one in the yard or around the house. I didn't want to see anyone yet—I simply wanted to see what the farmhouse looked like and exactly where it was.

I returned to the road and started to walk to the town. The first

person that I met was the duke. He was nailing printed signs onto trees along the road. The signs told about a show that he and the king were going to put on. It was going to be the same show in which the king was painted in bright colors and danced completely naked. Those fools were going to try that old trick again.

The duke was very surprised to see me and said, "Hello! Where did you come from? Where's the raft? Have you hidden it well?"

"That's what I planned to ask you."

"Why would you ask me?" said the duke, slowly.

"Well, yesterday when I saw the king so drunk, I said to myself that we wouldn't be leaving for many hours. So I offered to help a man in the town with his sheep and that took most of the day. When it was getting dark, I returned to the raft and found that it was gone. I said to myself that you and the king must have gotten into trouble and had to leave quickly, taking my slave Jim with you. I slept in the forest last night. What did happen to the raft?—and Jim—where's Jim?"

"I don't know what happened to the raft. The king—old fool that he is—made a trade and got forty dollars and spent much of it on whiskey and lost the rest. When we returned to the raft last night, we found that it was gone. We thought that you had continued traveling down the river and simply left us here."

"I wouldn't leave Jim, would I? He was my slave and the only property that I own."

"We never thought of that. We had come to consider Jim *our* slave. Yes, we certainly thought that he was ours. We had plenty of trouble protecting him and hiding him."

Then he asked me for some money, and I gave him ten cents. I had a lot of money, but I told him that ten cents was all I had. I told him to buy food with the ten cents and to give me some because I hadn't eaten anything since the day before.

He then looked at me with fear in his eyes and said, "Do you think that Jim will tell people in this town about our play? We'll kill him if he does."

"How can he tell about the play? I thought that he ran away."

“No! The king—fool that he is—sold him. And he never gave me any of the money, and the money is gone.”

“Sold him?” I said, and began to cry. “He was my slave and the money should be mine. Where is he? I want my slave.”

“You can’t have your slave, so stop crying about him. Do you plan to tell the people in this town about us? If you were to tell—”

“I don’t plan to tell anything. I have no time for that. I need to find my Jim.”

The duke stood thinking for a while. At last he said, “We have to be here for three days to earn money on this show. If you promise not to tell the men of this town about us, I’ll tell you where to find Jim.”

I promised.

“A farmer by the name of Silas Ph—” and then he stopped.

He started to tell me the truth, but when he stopped and began to think about it, I knew that he was changing his mind. He wouldn’t trust me. He wanted to be certain that I wouldn’t be in this town during the three days of the show.

He began a second time to give me an answer. “The man who bought Jim is named Abram Foster and he lives forty miles down this road, near a town called Lafayette.”

“I can walk there in three days,” I said. “I’ll start this afternoon.”

“No, you won’t. You’ll begin *now*! Don’t waste any time and don’t talk to anyone along the road. Walk quickly and you won’t get into any trouble. Do you understand?”

I had no problem understanding him. Now I was free to work on my own plans.

“Start walking,” the duke said, angrily. “Tell Mr. Foster whatever you please. He may believe Jim is your slave even though you have no proof. Maybe he’ll believe that he was tricked into thinking that he was going to get a reward for Jim. Tell Mr. Foster anything—I don’t care. But don’t speak to anyone in this town.”

I began to walk along the country road for a mile or two. When I knew that the duke couldn’t see me anymore, I left the road and ran through the forest to the Phelps’s farm. I needed to talk to Jim. I

didn't want Jim telling anyone about the king and the duke. I wanted no further trouble from them. I was afraid of what they might do to us if we were to reveal the truth about them.