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AND TELLS IT TWICE AS PLAIN

Margaret St. Clair

HE MUST HAVE RUN AWAY once before, though he was so young, because there was an iron bar on his right leg. He came stumbling toward Ira over the plowed field, having a lot of trouble with the furrows, and falling to his knees sometimes, but always getting up and running on.

He was a fool. But then, Ira thought, watching him and hating him, every nigger was a fool. Catch a white man acting like that! It was a kind of madness that seized them, their running away, an insanity.

Drapetomania, the preacher had called it last Sunday. He'd explained it came from the Greek, and had spelled it out carefully for the congregation. It had something to do with the shape of their narrow woolly African skulls. Otherwise they'd have sense enough to want to stay in the South, where the climate suited them and they were well-fed and happy.

The runaway boy—he looked to be about fourteen—was so near now that Ira could see the white showing all around his eyes and the sweat glistening on his black hide through the tatters of his shirt. The wind blew a rank odor from him in gusts; Ira felt his gorge rise.

He opened his mouth to bellow at the slave to get out of here, to go back where he belonged. The nigger had begun to act funny, though. He dropped to his knees, stayed swaying for a moment, and then pitched forward onto the ground. He did not stir, and after a second Ira put the milk pail down in the barn door and walked over to him.

He'd had a fainting fit, from the looks of him, unless it was put on. His eyes were closed and the bony sides moved only faintly in and out with his breath.

Ira prodded him with the toe of his boot. There was no response, and he was about to add a kick, when the black's eyelids moved. They opened; his big, bloodshot eyes swiveled about.

A wincing fear ran over the boy's face and distorted it when he saw Ira beside him, but desperation was underneath. He struggled to his knees before Ira, breathing in sobs.

"Please, please, sah," he said recklessly to Ira, "I ain't got no time. They after me. They gonna take me back. *Please.*" He held out one twiggy hand to him.

Ira's heavy fist was raised to strike the black to the earth again, the words of repudiation were on his lips. The basic ethic of the human race, the command that runs, "Thou shalt not betray," restrained him.

"God damn you, nigger," he said, "what you doin' here?"

"I—run off."

"Where from?"

"Fontenoy's."

Fontenoy's. Fontenoy had fifty niggers; he had hundreds of acres of rich bottom land in cotton; he lived like a king. Ira hated him and envied him and wanted to be like him.

"Damn you, nigger," Ira said harshly, wondering at himself, "git up in that barn loft and hide."

The black stumbled to his feet on the instant and began to run past Ira, lurchingly, to the barn.

"Wait!" Ira called after him. He felt a thrill of pleasure in seeing the black freeze in his tracks and look over his shoulder in fright, his eyes as round as zeros. "They got dogs after you?"

"No, no sah, not yet."

"Anh . . . what's your name?"

"Dick." The boy waited until Ira dismissed him with his eyes, and then ran toward the barn again.

When he had disappeared into the building, Ira drew a faded blue handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead. After a moment he picked up the milk pail, carried it into the dairy, and poured the milk into a big clean crock to settle.

Clara would churn tomorrow morning, he guessed. She was always after him wishing he could buy a nigger wench to help with the dairying. Trouble was, slaves were just too high. Even a poor one, like that boy in the barn, would cost two-three hundred dollars. Probably Fontenoy would have a reward offered for getting Dick back.

No, not for the reward. . . . He'd more or less promised. But

he felt an added resentment when he thought about the fifty or hundred dollars Fontenoy would offer which Dick was cheating him out of.

He took the empty pail into the kitchen and, finding Clara not in, went over to the cupboard and looked in it for food. He found a slab of fat pork Clara had considered too measly for Duke's dinner, added to it a hunk of yellow pone, and set them both on a cracked, chipped plate. Out in the yard, he pumped a gourd full of water, and carried it and the food into the barn. Duke had come out of his kennel and was growling and complaining around the foot of the ladder which led to the loft; Ira had to make the hound be quiet.

He mounted to the third rung and whistled softly. When Dick's head appeared, almost invisible in the dim light except for his eyes, Ira thrust the food at him.

"Stuff your belly full," he said contemptuously. "Tomorrow you got to git out of here."

Dick said nothing. He grabbed the food and ducked back into the loft. Ira, even below, could hear him begin to slobber and gasp over the food. It was a repulsive noise, like an animal's.

Ira left the barn slowly, chewing on a straw, and began his evening round of chores. Every time he stopped working, even for an instant, he became aware of Dick lying hidden up there in the loft. He found his gaze wandering to its red-painted outline, wondering whether any external change betrayed that it concealed a fugitive slave.

Darkness came on. From the kitchen the smell of frying potatoes and pork lifted out on the air. Clara must have come back and started supper. Ira finished with the stock, washed briefly in the tin basin by the back door, and went in.

Clara stood by the fire, trickling salt through her fingers on to the potatoes in the pan.

"Where you bin?" he said.

"Down to Miz' Bates. The patrol's out; they stopped me on the road on the way back."

"That so? Why?" Ira was making an effort to act interested and surprised.

"One of the hands run away from Fontenoy's. Miz' Bates says Luke Fontenoy is bound he's goin' to git him back and make an example out of him. That's the second runaway he's had in four months." Clara poured coffee into Ira's thick white cup and motioned him to sit down.

"Any reward?" he said after he had pulled his chair up. He shoveled a mountain of potatoes and a thick piece of the fried pork on to his plate.

"Miz' Bates says she thinks he'll go as high as two hundred dollars. It's worth it, to him, to keep them niggers from tryin' to run off always."

"Um." They ate in silence. Ira finished up on pone with black strap and read a little in the county *Gazette* while Clara fixed the dishes and put things away.

They went to bed early. By eight o'clock Ira had blown out the lamp and followed Clara up the narrow stair to their bedchamber.

He could not sleep. Long after Clara was breathing quietly beside him in the darkness, he lay wakeful and tense.

He couldn't stop thinking about the reward, two hundred dollars, and what he could do around the place with it. Paint for the house, and better seed for next year (he might get it from the Shakers), and some flowers and fruit trees for Clara. She'd like that. Dress goods and furniture and another cow. A team of mules. All sorts of things. Only, the nigger was thinking he was safe—you didn't do even a dog that way. Not but that Duke was a lot better and more account than that nigger. Only—well, he couldn't help his feelings, though he wondered at them. And it sure as hell would spite Luke Fontenoy. Luke thought he owned the county, pretty near the state.

Ira twisted into another position and tried for sleep. It would not come, and now that he had resolved not to collect the reward, he found himself starting at every noise and fancying he heard the hoofbeats of the patrol. God knew what they'd do to him if they found he was helping another man's nigger get away. Nigger stealing was a mighty serious thing.

After a long time, he reached out in the dark for his father's big gold repeater and pressed the spring. Eleven o'clock. He got up very softly for fear of wakening Clara and drew on his day clothes over his nightshirt. Down in the kitchen, he groped about until he found a lantern, lit it, and by its light hunted the pepper box. Then he set out across the fields.

Half an hour later he came back, somewhat easier in his mind. The pepper he'd laid across the black's trail, as far back as he'd seen him, ought to bother the dogs if they got hounds. And they were sure to, pretty soon. The very silence of the barn as he passed it seemed to threaten him.

He was awakened, heavy-eyed and only partly refreshed, by Clara's

tugging at his shoulder. During breakfast, one of the Bates' tow-headed young ones—a runny-nosed boy with faded blue eyes and only one suspender to his britches—came in to borrow a chunk of fire.

"The patrols is out all over the roads," he said to Clara, after she had put the live coals into the little pail he was carrying. "They couldn't a cricket git through without their catchin' it."

Ira felt a cold constriction in his chest at the boy's words. "Seems like you know an almighty lot, young 'un," he said chillingly.

The Bates boy was not impressed. "Yep, Maw says I'm goin' to be a right smart feller when I grow up, yes sir. I'm goin' to have me a dozen niggers and live rich, like Fontenoy. Wisht I could make a start by catchin' that nigger of his. Two hundred dollars in gold, yes sir!" He departed, sniffing and swinging his pail in his hand.

Ira went about his work in a bitter abstraction. If the patrols were out on all the roads, he couldn't tell the nigger to get out; too much danger he'd tell where he'd been laying up when they caught him. And every hour he lay up in the barn increased the risk. Oh, damn him, damn his stinking black hide!

The impotent fever and fret mounted in him. Toward noon he took the fugitive water and pone, feigning to Clara that he was feeding the hound dog. "You got to stay till they take the patrols off the roads," he whispered into the dimness of the loft. "I wish you was in hell."

As the sun began to wester, his anxiety for the black to be gone grew racking. He found himself working near the barn, inventing chores to be done where there were no chores, and looking, constantly looking, up toward the loft.

After supper he could stand it no longer. Telling Clara he wanted to return the volume of the encyclopedia he'd borrowed from Udell, he lit the lantern and started off down the road. He had to see for himself.

The patrol stopped him twice on the way to Udell's. Udell himself was too busy with a sick horse to talk to Ira, but Mrs. Udell, lean in a calico dress, was full of ideas about the fugitive.

"It's them Quakers," she said, "with all their ab'litionist talk keepin' the nigger stirred up. I never saw a Quaker yet, for all the talk about 'render unto Caesar,' that wasn't an ab'litionist at heart. Underground railroaders! If we all get killed in our beds, it'll be their fault." The bridge of her thin nose twitched as she talked.

Ira agreed with her and made his escape. The patrol stopped him

once more on the way back; and the patrol leader, his white teeth gleaming in the smoky light of the flaring torches, told Ira they would make a house-to-house search tomorrow.

"Course, it's not legal," he said, "but if a man won't let us go over his place—well, then, we know what to think. Then we can git a warrant for a search."

Ira nodded. He couldn't help feeling that the remark was aimed at him, though he told himself not to be a fool. How could they possibly suspect him? He was a respectable man, a landowner, not the kind of man who'd steal a nigger.

But what was he to do? There was the nigger, real and solid and inexorable as sin, lying up there in the loft, and there was the search coming tomorrow. Ira's heavy face set in a grimace of misery; he felt like beating his hands together in indecision and rage. What was he to do?

Clara was sitting up waiting for him in a wrapper, and as soon as he put the lantern down, she began scolding him. What did he mean, staying at Udell's so long, and at this time of year, too, when there were a million chores to be done? Had he forgotten he was driving the wagon into town tomorrow? How'd he think he was going to get a good start when he came in so late?

"I clean forgot it, Clara," he said after a moment. His features had gone blank. "Let's get to bed as quick's we can so I can start before sunrise." He started up to bed without waiting for her to agree.

The lamp blown out, lying on the crackling mattress, he made his plans. He'd put Dick in the bottom of the wagon, cover him over with sacks and straw, and get past the patrol that way. They might stop him—he didn't think so—but he'd have to take the chance. He'd drive to Frazier's, the big store, when he got into town, and dispose of most of the produce, but he'd take Clara's eggs and butter to that little store the Quaker ran. Maybe Mrs. Udell was right. If not, he'd just have to drive the nigger back again.

He turned on one side and drifted off to sleep. His last feeling before dreams closed over him was of bitterness toward Dick, who was making him risk so much.

He breakfasted alone in the kitchen, by the flaring, yellow lamp. Clara was still abed. He drank one cup of coffee and then, since the morning was damp and chill, thought of taking some to the black. He ended by pouring what was left in the pot into his cup and swallowing it himself. Coffee cost too much to waste on *him*.

Ira had anticipated a long explanation to Dick, but he caught on at once. He slipped down the ladder like a shadow and stretched himself in the bottom of the wagon without a sound. Ira saw with relief that his body was so thin and narrow that it wouldn't bulk up at all in the wagon. He covered him over as well as he could, and then packed the produce in around him. He really didn't show at all when Ira was done.

They were about six miles from town, on the road between Sacher's place and the old Morrice farm, when the patrol stopped them.

"Goin' t' market, Mr. Clayton?" the patrol leader asked from the back of his horse.

Ira's jaw muscles grew tense. "Um-hum," he replied. "My wife kep' after me. . . . You ain't found that nigger yet?"

The patrol leader spat into the road. "No. He must be holin' up somewhere. Somebody must be helpin' him. But sooner or later, he'll try to git out, say in a wagon like this, or some such way. . . . Say, what you got on that side there, Mr. Clayton?" He bent over and prodded in the straw with his whip.

Ira felt a brief, terrible torment. He could tell the patrol leader that he'd hidden Dick when he came to him, to be sure of getting the reward. He could tell him that he'd hidden the black in the wagon as the best means of getting him to go with him quietly. And then he could ask the patrol leader to go along with him to Fontenoy's and be sure he got the reward, the way his right was.

"Oh, nothin' much," he answered thickly. "Just some of Miz' Clayton's butter and eggs."

"Um-hum." The man straightened again. Ira found it impossible to say whether he had been suspicious and had been deceived by the smallness of the space Dick occupied, or whether he had been idly curious. "Well, I better let you be on your way."

Ira geed to the team. After the patrol was out of sight, he pulled on the reins until the horses slowed to a walk, and then got out his big handkerchief. Sweat was trickling coldly down inside his shirt. They'd hanged a man last year at the county seat for helping a slave to escape.

Ira got into town a little after noon. He hitched the wagon in the square across from Frazier's and sat on the seat eating the hunks of pone and sowbelly he'd brought from home. There was a hotel in town where he could have eaten, but Ira would have felt embarrassed going in there, even in his better clothes, before all the town people.

He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and wiped the hand on his handkerchief. There was a bottle in the corner under the seat, and he took a pull from it, though he wasn't a drinking man. Then he went into Frazier's to do his trading.

It was nearly three when he finished. The wagon was a good deal emptier, but Dick was still well concealed. Ira put the sack of coffee, the bag of wheat flour, and the other things he'd got, in the wagon with careful casualness. It wouldn't do to call attention to Dick by trying to cover him up.

He drove leisurely over to the store Elziver, the Quaker, owned. Now that the moment was almost here, Ira's tongue was thick and dry. He was going to trust someone else with his secret, and he was afraid.

He took the crock of butter and some of the eggs in with him. There were other customers in the store, and Ira had to wait. It was only deferring the crisis, of course, but he felt relieved.

At last the others left and Elziver—he was shorter than Ira, and lightly made—came to wait on him.

"What can I do for thee, friend?" he said.

Ira showed him the butter and eggs. Slowly, taking all the time he could, he traded for them. He got a little pair of jingling gold earrings for Clara, and a clay pipe—he got tired of corn cobs—for himself. He went out and got the rest of the eggs out of the wagon and traded for them too.

But at last it was all over. The Quaker looked at him expectantly, and when he saw there was nothing more, began to wrap up the things Ira had bought.

Ira Clayton leaned across the counter to him and spoke softly. "Would—would you like a bale of black wool?" he asked.

Elziver's eyes flicked up to his face quickly and then went down again. "I do not understand thee, my friend," he said. He went on with his neat tying up of the parcels.

Ira's hands clenched. He swallowed. "I've got that—that nigger that ran off from Fontenoy's," he said. "In my wagon. In back."

The Quaker's eyes went up to Ira Clayton's face again. There was an instant's silence. What he saw in the hard, heavy features and the jutting jaw seemed to reassure him. He came out from behind the counter and stood by Ira's side. "Yes?" he said.

Under Elziver's direction, Ira drove the wagon around to the back, where there was a covered portico for the unloading of goods. While Elziver leaned on the wagon and kept watch, Ira got Dick out and led

him into the back room, where the goods were. The black was so stiff from the jolting he had had that he could hardly walk.

Elziver got cold meat and baker's bread from the oak cupboard in the corner. He poured sherry into a pewter mug and offered it and the food to the black. Watching him eat and drool as he ate, Ira felt a momentary resentment that a nigger should be served while he, a white man, went without, but it was swallowed up in a vast wave of relief.

He'd got rid of the burden he'd carried for the last two days. He'd got rid of fear and guilt. He could hear the patrol go by and not worry, he could hold up his head and be Ira Clayton, a respectable middle-aged farmer, again. It was all over, and the madness, or whatever it was, that had seized him when Dick had spoken to him, was over too and could be forgotten. He was free.

Elziver, his head on one side, was speaking now. "Thou are new to the work of the underground railroad, friend, art thou not?"

Ira opened his mouth to tell him what he thought of the whole wicked idea of stealing blacks away from their masters.

"Yes, I am," he said humbly. "You'll have to teach me a good many things, I guess. Yes."