CHAPTER VII

The Mother's Struggle

It is impossible to conceive of a human creature more wholly desolate and forlorn than Eliza, when she turned her footsteps from Uncle Tom's cabin.

Her husband's suffering and dangers, and the danger of her child, all blended in her mind, with a confused and stunning sense of the risk she was running, in leaving the only home she had ever known, and cutting loose from the protection of a friend whom she loved and revered. Then there was the parting from every familiar object,—the place where she had grown up, the trees under which she had played, the groves where she had walked many an evening in happier days, by the side of her young husband,—everything, as it lay in the clear, frosty starlight, seemed to speak reproachfully to her, and ask her whither could she go from a home like that?

But stronger than all was maternal love, wrought into a paroxysm of frenzy by the near approach of a fearful danger. Her boy was old enough to have walked by her side, and, in an indifferent case, she would only have led him by the hand; but now the bare thought of putting him out of her arms made her shudder, and she strained him to her bosom with a convulsive grasp, as she went rapidly forward.

The frosty ground creaked beneath her feet, and she trembled at the sound; every quaking leaf and fluttering shadow sent the blood backward to her heart, and quickened her footsteps. She wondered within herself at the strength that seemed to be come upon her; for she felt the weight of her boy as if it had been a feather, and every flutter of fear seemed to increase the supernatural power that bore her on, while from her pale lips burst forth, in frequent ejaculations, the prayer to a Friend above—"Lord, help! Lord, save me!"

If it were your Harry, mother, or your Willie, that were going to be torn from you by a brutal trader, tomorrow morning,—if you had seen the man, and heard that the papers were signed and delivered, and you had only from twelve o'clock till morning to make good your escape,—how fast could you walk? How many miles could you make in those few brief hours, with the darling at your bosom,—the little sleepy head on your shoulder,—the small, soft arms trustingly holding on to your neck?

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The boundaries of the farm, the grove, the wood-lot, passed by her dizzily, as she walked on; and still she went, leaving one familiar object after another, slacking not, pausing not, till reddening daylight found her many a long mile from all traces of any familiar objects upon the open highway.

She had often been, with her mistress, to visit some connections, in the little village of T——, not far from the Ohio river, and knew the road well. To go thither, to escape across the Ohio river, were the first hurried outlines of her plan of escape; beyond that, she could only hope in God.

When horses and vehicles began to move along the highway, with that alert perception peculiar to a state of excitement, and which seems to be a sort of inspiration, she became aware that her headlong pace and distracted air might bring on her remark and suspicion. She therefore put the boy on the ground, and, adjusting her dress and bonnet, she walked on at as rapid a pace as she thought consistent with the preservation of appearances. In her little bundle she had provided a store of cakes and apples, which she used as expediencies
for quickening the speed of the child, rolling the apple some yards before them, when the boy would run
with all his might after it; and this ruse, often repeated, carried them over many a half-mile.

... An hour before sunset, she entered the village of T——, by the Ohio river, weary and foot-sore, but still
strong in heart. Her first glance was at the river, which lay, like Jordan, between her and the Canaan of liberty
on the other side.

It was now early spring, and the river was swollen and turbulent; great cakes of floating ice were swinging
heavily to and fro in the turbid waters. Owing to the peculiar form of the shore on the Kentucky side, the
land bending far out into the water, the ice had been lodged and detained in great quantities, and the narrow
channel which swept round the bend was full of ice, piled one cake over another, thus forming a temporary
barrier to the descending ice, which lodged, and formed a great, undulating raft, filling up the whole river,
and extending almost to the Kentucky shore.

... In consequence of all the various delays, it was about three-quarters of an hour after Eliza had laid her child
to sleep in the village tavern that the party came riding into the same place. Eliza was standing by the window,
looking out in another direction, when Sam's quick eye caught a glimpse of her. Haley and Andy were two
yards behind. At this crisis, Sam contrived to have his hat blown off, and uttered a loud and characteristic
ejaculation, which startled her at once; she drew suddenly back; the whole train swept by the window, round
to the front door.

A thousand lives seemed to be concentrated in that one moment to Eliza. Her room opened by a side door
to the river. She caught her child, and sprang down the steps towards it. The trader caught a full glimpse of
her just as she was disappearing down the bank; and throwing himself from his horse, and calling loudly on
Sam and Andy, he was after her like a hound after a deer. In that dizzy moment her feet to her scarce seemed
to touch the ground, and a moment brought her to the water's edge. Right on behind they came; and, nerved
with strength such as God gives only to the desperate, with one wild cry and flying leap, she vaulted sheer
over the turbid current by the shore, on to the raft of ice beyond. It was a desperate leap—impossible to
anything but madness and despair; and Haley, Sam, and Andy, instinctively cried out, and lifted up their
hands, as she did it.

The huge green fragment of ice on which she alighted pitched and creaked as her weight came on it, but
she staid there not a moment. With wild cries and desperate energy she leaped to another and still another
cake; stumbling—leaping—slipping—springing upwards again! Her shoes are gone—her stockings cut from
her feet—while blood marked every step; but she saw nothing, felt nothing, till dimly, as in a dream, she saw
the Ohio side, and a man helping her up the bank.

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