John Woolman and the Slave Girl

By Chuck Fager – Illustrations by Charlotte Lewis

Near the Occoquan River, Northern Virginia, 1757

Ruth hated digging potatoes. She especially hated digging them in the middle of the day. The late summer Virginia sun sent trickles of sweat down her dark forehead into her eyes as she stooped over the rows of green plants.

But she hated it most on days like today, when she had to listen to the Hudnutt boys racing their horses up and down the road past the field where Ruth and her mother Abigail were stooped and working, shouting and whooping as they went by.

The two Hudnutts were white, sons of the owner of a large plantation a mile or so down toward the river, and Ruth had never seen them doing any work. Unless, she thought resentfully, you called it work to go trotting back and forth to the ferry, or hunting pheasants and foxes with long shiny muskets.

The closest she ever saw them come was driving their father's big wagon, piled high with hay or tobacco and carrying one of their many slaves in the back to do the unloading. She had never seen them digging potatoes, washing clothes over a fire, or any of the other tasks she and her mother labored over day after day for their owner, Richard Barton.

Ruth chopped at the ground angrily with her hoe. She could hear their loud boyish voices again, for the

third or fourth time since morning, nearing the bend in the road that marked the end of Richard Barton's smaller property.

When the horses came into view, Ruth straightened up and watched them, her thick eyebrows furrowed into a frown. She didn't know their names; but the older boy rode a big grey stallion and his brother a roan mare with a flowing black mane.

Ruth thought both horses were beautiful. But they were lathered from galloping, their sides clotted with dampened dust. Ruth hated the way the boys mistreated them, driving them so hard all the time. The riders were laughing and looking back toward the bend, as if they had seen something very funny there. In a moment they passed out of view beyond Richard Barton's small frame house, where a line of tall oak trees grew beside the road.

"Ruth, I told thee not to pay them boys any mind," her mother said from behind her. "It just makes thee fretful." Abigail understood her daughter well enough that she didn't have to look to know what Ruth was doing. Abigail continued brushing dirt off potatoes and dropping them into a basket.

Ruth was angry for a moment; a cry of protest formed in her mind. But then she checked herself. Abigail was right, of course. And there was no point yelling at her about it anyway.

"Yes, Mama," she replied in a listless, mechanical way. Still, she didn't lift her hoe again, but continued to stand, leaning against it, looking off toward the bend in the road.

After a moment her mother said, "Ruth?" questioningly, and glanced up. "What is thee looking at now?"

"I'm lookin' at somebody in an odd-colored suit," Ruth replied softly. Abigail followed her eyes toward the bend, then stood up herself to get a better view.

Out of the swirl of dust raised by the Hudnutts' horses a man was walking. He had a large brown hat on his head, a bedroll slung over a shoulder and was wearing a suit of undyed homespun that was not quite white in color. He was apparently headed for Richard Barton's house, because he turned in at the gate and disappeared behind the corner of the low clapboard building. He looked tired and was almost covered with dust, as if he had been walking a long distance.

Ruth turned to her mother, and noticed that her lined face was now drawn into a scowl. "What's the matter, mama?" she asked. "Who is that man?"

Abigail abruptly began brushing the dirt from her hands, then bent to pick up the basket. “That’s John Woolman, from New Jersey,” she said hurriedly. “He must be here to talk Quaker business with Richard Barton.” She turned toward the house. “I’m going to take these into the kitchen,” she added. “Thee hoe up some more and I’ll call thee directly for dinner.”

“But mama,” Ruth insisted, “who is John Woolman? How does thee know his name? And why is he dressed so strangely?”

Abigail clearly didn’t want to be questioned about the man. “I’ll call thee directly,” she repeated over her shoulder, walking even faster. “Thee get some more potatoes, hear?”

Reluctantly, Ruth turned back to the plants, and spaded up a few more of the lumpy vegetables. With each stroke of the hoe, the questions echoed in her mind: Who was this man Woolman? Maybe he was just another one of the travelling Quaker ministers who visited Richard Barton from time to time. But they all dressed in brown or grey, as did Barton himself, and came on horseback. And their arrivals didn’t upset her mother, as this newcomer obviously did somehow.

More often, the arrival of a travelling minister meant there would be something special at supper, and in the evening a meeting for worship in the parlor, which Ruth, Abigail and her old uncle Jacob could attend. Sometimes two or three of the other Friends in the county would join them, sitting silently on Barton’s stiff wooden chairs, though few ever brought any of their own slaves. In fact, their master always seemed rather uneasy about these gatherings with the blacks, though of course he would not complain to his visitors. But he never took Ruth or his other two slaves to the regular meetings for worship down at the Meetinghouse near Bynum Run.

Ruth’s curiosity wasn’t eased any at dinner, which Abigail, again unusually, brought down to her and Jacob in their small cabin behind the

house. “He’s here to talk some Quaker business with Richard Barton,” she hissed shortly when she was asked again. “He was here once before, four or five years ago.”

Then she gave Ruth a set of instructions for the afternoon which centered around more work weeding and hoeing in the large garden, then shelling butter beans and shucking corn–all of which were to be done in or around the slave cabin, Ruth noted, well away from the house.

“I’ll come and get them later, hear,” Abigail concluded. “I’m going to be making some pies this evening. If thee behaves, thee might get some for supper.” Then she was off to the house again, still scowling.

Uncle Jacob was no help either, though he didn’t seem to be holding anything back. He just shook his old grey head and told her again not to fret herself. Then he sat down in the rope hammock tied from a tree to the shady side of the cabin and prepared for his afternoon nap.

Uncle Jacob was no longer strong, and he didn’t do much real work anymore besides fishing down near the ferry and milking the two cows. But he knew lots of stories, including some about Ruth’s father, his baby brother, who Jacob said had been one of the strongest black men of his day in Northern Virginia.

Ruth didn’t remember her father; he had been sold off to someone in Maryland long ago when she was just a baby, before she and Abigail and Jacob were bought by Richard Barton.

Uncle Jacob also could read a little bit, and from time to time would pull out a battered copy of the Bible from the black cloth bag under his cot and read to her. She liked best the Exodus story, with Moses standing up to Pharaoh and leading the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt. Ruth had made him promise to teach her how to read when she turned 15, and that wasn’t far off now, it was coming next Fourth Month, in the spring.

After dinner, Ruth at first went about her chores without enthusiasm, still preoccupied with the heat and the peculiarly-dressed stranger her mother seemed intent on hiding from her. But about the time she finished picking two dozen ears of corn, she had an idea: she could find out for herself what was going on in the house, if she was quiet and careful about it.

Once this occurred to her, she worked quickly, and soon had the ears shucked and a bowl of butter beans shelled, waiting to be picked up by her mother. Then she stepped quietly out of the cabin, walked around the sunny side away from where Uncle Jacob was softly snoring in his hammock, then through the long high rows of corn behind him. Where the corn came closest to the house she peeped out between the tall green stalks at the

window facing her. The coast seemed clear, so she scampered nimbly over to the building and dropped to her hands and knees in the dirt beneath the sill.

The window was propped open, to encourage the entry of any passing breezes. From inside the sparsely furnished parlor came men's voices. One was Richard Barton's. The other, which had a strange shortened accent, she guessed was Woolman's.

After only a few words, she understood what had disturbed her mother so much about him. Ruth's eyes widened and she felt her stomach begin to churn as she heard the visitor tell her master that he believed it was the will of God that he should set his three slaves free.

Free! The word smoldered in her mind like an ember snapped out of a fireplace onto a rug. The word made her see the Hudnutt boys racing their horses along the road. Was that freedom? Was that what this John Woolman was telling her master she deserved?

Incredulous, she started to rise from her crouch without thinking, to take another look at him through the window.

But Richard Barton's deeper voice cut into her fantasy, banished it with a word like an over-friendly dog, and stopped her where she was.

"John Woolman," he declared, "I cannot possibly do what thee is asking. I will not argue Scripture with thee. Thee has thy concern and thy certificate from Philadelphia, and I respect them. But I have my concerns as well. And thee has little understanding of how I have to live here in Virginia. Thee is not simply asking that I dispose of some ill-gotten property, like a barrel of rum or smuggled Bohea tea. Thee wants me to give up my whole living."

Ruth heard his boots clump across the wood floor, then back again. He was pacing as he talked.

"As it is, John," he continued, "it's hard enough to be a Friend in this county already. The big planters, and old Thomas Hudnutt above all, are suspicious of us because we refuse to join the militia training. And many of our other customs seem at least odd and possibly dangerous to them as well. Now they have heard about the advice and queries from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting against slavery. They're watching, to see if we're going to turn our slaves loose on the roads and then come preaching manumission to them too. John Woolman, believe me they do not take that prospect lightly."

He paused again, but kept pacing.

"I'm not a hard master, John," he resumed. "Thee will find no horsewhip in this house. I have kept old Jacob at my expense, and held off

selling the girl Ruth away from her mother when the crop was bad two years back and money was very scarce. I have even considered teaching her to read, if I could find a trustworthy Christian tutor and could afford it. If I should be forced to sell them, I can assure thee it will be to other Friends or people I know to be peaceable Christians."

He stopped again, and when he spoke further his voice was lower and more solemn.

"But no, John, I will not promise thee more. I have lived in this county since I was a young man. I helped build Bynum Run Meetinghouse with my own hands. My parents, my wife and our only son are lying there in the burial ground. I have no other family left."

He clumped across the floor again. "If I free my chattels, I could not work this land by myself. But beyond that, having freed them, I would have to leave the county, and probably Virginia; old man Hudnutt would see to that himself. And I am not ready to quit this place for some notion of thine, or Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's either."

His voice rose again. "Friends have owned slaves since we came to the colonies almost a hundred years ago, John. William Penn owned them in Pennsylvania. Even George Fox did not ask us to do more than use them well, as Christians should, and as most of us have. Anything more than that is just notions."

He sighed. "When I die, this land and my property will go to the Monthly Meeting. If they choose to dispose of the slaves as thee suggests, I will not be there to stand in the way. But while I am alive," he finished, "I will not do it. I do not feel led to it."

With that, his boots clumped across the floor once more, then Ruth heard him sink into a chair. Woolman made no reply, and Ruth soon realized they were settling into the silence of worship.

She leaned against the clapboard for a few moments, trying to take in what she had heard. But her reflections were soon interrupted by a new sound from the parlor. It was a heavy, racking sound, like someone sobbing steadily. What was happening now? Ruth's curiosity was irresistible. Slowly she straightened up until her eyes came just above the windowsill.

Richard Barton sat facing the blackened fireplace, slouched in the chair, arms folded across his chest, eyes fixed on the floor. John Woolman, sitting across from him in his plain homespun shirt, was holding his head in his hands and weeping. Neither seemed aware of anything beyond the drama of their now wordless dialogue.

Ruth stared at the two men for a long moment, her own feelings a tense jumble. Then she heard the back door open and shut.

Her mother was headed out to the cabin! Ruth couldn't let Abigail find her here.

She ducked down again, then crept along the house to the rear corner. Abigail was nearing the cabin. As soon as she went into the doorway, Ruth sprinted toward the corn. Once in it, she ran down to the far side of the patch, away from the house, grabbed a few more ears and then walked back to the cabin, trying to slow her rapid breathing. She arrived just as Abigail emerged in search of her.

"Oh, there thee is," her mother said. Her arms were full of the shucked corn and shelled butter beans in their bowls. "Put that corn inside and then fill up the basket I left on the table with apples. After that thee can play down by the stream. But stay away from the house til I call thee for supper, hear?"

"All right," the girl sulked. Well, she thought as she went in to get the basket, at least I don't have to hoe anymore potatoes today. And so what if she doesn't want me to hear what's going on up there? I already know.

Ruth walked out again, through the corn to the pair of apple trees, the fruit still green and sour but good for pies. She was pleased with the defiant success of her eavesdropping, even though what she had heard had her mind roiling like the river after the heavy spring rains.

Supper was marked by the appearance of the promised apple pie, tart and delicious as ever, but little more in the way of information. Abigail stayed up in the house, serving the men and cleaning up, until well after dark. Ruth managed to slip out into the corn patch again long enough to take another brief look at the parlor window from a distance.

In it she could see candles burning, and Richard Barton's large shadow flickering across the opening. He was still pacing, so he and Woolman must still be talking. But Ruth didn't dare go closer; Uncle Jacob had promised to read to her before she went to bed, and while she was watching the house she heard him call her.

Tonight he read from Genesis, the story of Joseph and his brothers. Ruth had heard this story before too, and she like its ending, with the victorious Joseph being magnanimous to the brothers who had sold him into slavery. But she was restless and kept interrupting, asking her uncle questions about reading and begging him to start teaching her now instead of waiting all the long months til spring.

Finally, Jacob closed the book and frowned at her, then shook his head. "My lord, child," he said, "can't thee wait for anything? There is plenty of time for that."

"No there isn't," Ruth protested. Just since that afternoon, she had begun to feel a great impatience. There were lots of books in Richard Barton's house. Reading had something to do, she now realized, with being free. "Uncle Jacob," she pressed, "can't thee teach me *now*?"

"Well," the old man hedged, "it's time for bed *now*. But I'll think about it, and we'll talk about it again in a day or two.

She figured he was just putting her off, but as she climbed into her cot and pulled the worn quilt up under her chin, she resolved to remind him about it tomorrow, and the day after that. She would pester him, she thought drowsily, til he gave in.

Ruth didn't sleep very well that night. She stirred once and heard her mother whispering intently to Uncle Jacob, words she couldn't make out. When she turned over, Abigail lowered her voice. Later she thought she heard noises outside the cabin, but couldn't tell whether they were real or part of the uneasy dreams she couldn't remember later.

Finally she found herself suddenly awake, staring into the darkness, listening as if some strange sound had awakened her.

Then she did hear a strange sound: a shuffling, out on the small cabin porch, followed by a muffled cough. Someone was on the porch!

Ruth's first thought was of robbers; her second of Indians; but then, when another quiet cough was followed by what seemed like a snore, these fantasies faded. Whoever it was out there was asleep, and thus not immediately dangerous.

That wasn't a matter for fear, but rather a subject of curiosity. It was not yet light, but the eastern sky was turning from black to dark blue in preparation for the sun. Ruth quietly pulled off the quilt, slipped on her dress, and crept to the door.

Opening it a crack, she first saw a brown shape on the porch planking just outside it, a shape she recognized. It was John Woolman's brown hat! She swung the door wider; it creaked. A figure stirred, sat up in the bedroll, and then she was staring into the still sleepy eyes of John Woolman himself.

"Good morning, friend," Woolman said softly, rubbing his eyes and stifling a yawn. He was fully dressed, in his buff homespun, except for his boots and hat. He pulled these on, and asked as he did so, "What is thy name? Is it Ruth?"

She nodded and stepped silently out the door, closing it carefully behind her. "And thee is John Woolman," she whispered back. She felt very bold, and yet encouraged by the openness of his expression. "Why was thee sleeping here?" she asked.

Woolman smiled, and she could see a film of grey stubble on his unshaven chin. “Well,” he replied slowly, “I guess I did not feel very comfortable in the beds inside, all of which were made by thee and thy mother, working as slaves without pay.” He threw his legs over the edge of the porch, and motioned for Ruth to sit beside him.

“Thee wants Richard Barton to set us free, doesn’t thee,” Ruth said as she sat down beside him. “Are there no slaves in Philadelphia?”

Woolman chuckled quietly. “Oh my yes, there are slaves a-plenty in Philadelphia. But many Friends there have freed their Negroes, and we are working on the others, as we are working on Friend Barton, too.”

“But he said he wouldn’t, didn’t he,” Ruth blurted. “He’ll never free us as long as he lives.” She was inwardly astounded at how much she was saying out loud to this visitor; yet she didn’t feel wary of him as she did instinctively with other strange whites.

Woolman didn’t ask where she had learned so much. He only nodded, the smile fading from his friendly features. “Yes, Richard Barton does not yet see the evil of slavery . But I have prayed that he will, and God has softened much harder hearts than his. He is not a bad man, Ruth.”

Her first impulse was to challenge this judgment, but she thought better of her anger and instead asked again about Woolman’s exotic-sounding homeland.

“Tell me about Philadelphia and New Jersey,” she urged. “Are free Negroes able to work for themselves there? Do they have their own houses and property? Do they–-?” she stopped, embarrassed now to ask if any of their children had horses, like the Hudnutt boys.

Woolman was nodding steadily. “Yes, almost all the freed people now work for wages,” he said, “many of them for their former masters. A few have even gone into business and acquired some property, and I believe many more will do so. Others have become apprentices, learning useful trades. My friend Anthony Benezet conducts a school for young Negroes like thyself.”

A school, Ruth wondered. “Is that where they can learn to read?” she wondered aloud.

“And to write as well,” Woolman replied.

Now Ruth’s eyes were shining. “I would like to learn to read and write,” she told John Woolman. “My Uncle Jacob–”

“*Ruth*! What is thee doing there?” demanded her mother’s voice. Ruth started and then jumped up to face her.

“I was,” she stammered, “I was just–”

"She was talking to me, Abigail," Woolman put in on her behalf. "We were talking about Philadelphia."

Ruth's mother did not dare speak as sharply to a white man as she had to her daughter. "We thank thee, John Woolman," she said cautiously, "I'm sure Ruth enjoyed it. Now she has to help her uncle get ready to milk the cows." She peered at the girl, and her tone changed perceptibly. "Ruth, come in now. Uncle Jacob needs thee."

Ruth could hear the apprehension in Abigail's voice. She took a step toward the door, then hesitated. Her mother was lying; Jacob milked the cows by himself, he always had unless he was ill. And she knew that once Abigail got her away from Woolman, she would make sure Ruth didn't get near him again. Ruth wanted to sit back down and hear more about Philadelphia, where free Negroes owned their own property and could learn to read.

While she still hesitated, another voice loudly shattered the dawning quiet. "*John!* John Woolman! Where is thee?"

It was Richard Barton, coming toward the cabin from the house, carrying a lantern. Seeing the three figures on the cabin porch, he hurried up. Then he saw Woolman's bedroll, still open on the boards.

"John, *what* is the meaning of this?" he demanded, pointing at it. "Why wasn't thee in thy bed in the house?"

Abigail, thoroughly frightened now, commanded her daughter: "Ruth! Come in here *right now*!" Ruth scurried past her through the doorway and flung herself on her cot. Abigail shut the door behind her, but they could still hear the men's voices outside. Richard Barton was angry, and John Woolman, though he spoke mildly, was unyielding.

"I meant no offense, Richard," he said. "I was so uneasy about the unpaid labor of thy chattels that I could not rest in the house. I came out here to sleep and to leave them some money for their labors on my behalf."

"*Money*!" shouted Barton. "How dare thee do such a thing! John Woolman, a personal testimony is one thing, but to try and undermine a man's relationship with his slaves by paying them behind his back is something else. I will not tolerate it."

Then he seemed to realize that this argument was going on practically in the laps of its subjects, and he abruptly lowered his voice.

"We will talk more of this inside," he concluded.

"Abigail," he called, "come start the fire and prepare breakfast. If John Woolman will not eat it, I will." They heard the two men tramping back toward the house.

Immediately Abigail was at Ruth's bedside, shaking her. "What was thee doing out there, girl?" she demanded harshly. "Tell me!"

Ruth looked up, surprised and fearful at her mother's tone. "I-I woke up when I heard him snoring on the porch," she answered meekly, "and I went out to talk with him. What was wrong with that?"

Abigail let go of her daughter's shoulder and stood over her, a mixture of fierceness and despair showing on her face. "Never thee mind," she said thickly, "thee just stay away from him, hear?"

But now Ruth could no longer swallow her words. All her new impatience, and old resentments came welling up and spilled over.

"Why, mama?" she demanded. "What's wrong with talking to him about being free, and Philadelphia, where Negroes work for themselves and even go to school? That's what he came here for, isn't it? Why can't I hear about it, and talk about it too?" There was fierceness in her young voice now.

But Abigail had an answer ready. "Thee shouldn't hear about it because it isn't real, that's why. Philadelphia is another world, hundreds of miles away, and even there the Quakers he talks about are only a handful. His talk of freedom is just a dream for most slaves even there. Here in our county, in all Virginia, it isn't even a dream. It's almost a lie."

"But why is it a lie, mother," Ruth persisted. And as she cried out, she felt tears come into her eyes. "John Woolman said God could change Richard's heart and make him set us free. He said Richard isn't a bad man."

"Richard Barton is only half the reason," Abigail retorted, "Virginia is the other part. We couldn't live here as free Negroes. The other slaveholders wouldn't stand for it." She leaned down closer to Ruth again, and raised a finger toward the door.

"Thee doesn't know what slavery can be like, girl. Woolman is right in a way–Richard Barton isn't a bad master. Thee has never been whipped.

And he's turned down offers from old man Hudnutt to buy thee away from me, when he needed the money."

She waved a hand at the wall. "This cabin is small," she said, "but it keeps out most of the wind, and we are fed more than many.

"Yes, Barton is no saint, but we are better off here than most other blacks in the county, or in Virginia. If Richard was foolish enough to take Woolman's advice, I don't know where we would end up, but it wouldn't be in Philadelphia, and it almost sure would be in someplace worse than where we are."

Abigail straightened up again, rubbed her hands on her apron, then turned her face away.

"That's why I don't want thee hearing such talk," she said. "It's dangerous for thee, Ruth. thee is too young to see through it. It's–"

Her voice broke, and she rubbed her eyes with one hand. "Life is full of trouble enough," she said huskily. "Thee doesn't need to go looking for any more. And that's all this John Woolman is bringing."

She walked to the door and opened it. "I'll bring thee breakfast down here after while. Then thee dig some more potatoes. And *stay away* from the house."

She stepped out into the now pink morning, and pulled the door shut behind her.

Ruth fell back on her cot and sobbed into the rumpled quilt. After a few moments she felt uncle Jacob's rough hand on the back of her head, stroking her short thick hair. "Don't cry child," he said gently. "Thy mother is right, but we can still smile about some things."

"Like what?" Ruth blubbered.

Her uncle pondered a moment, then said, "Like a pretty sunrise I see comin' in right now through the window, and a cool drink of fresh spring water. Come on now," he coaxed, "wipe those watery eyes and we'll go outside."

Ruth responded to her uncle's efforts to cheer her up as well as she could, but her mother's hard words still weighed on her spirit like lumps of lead. After breakfast she reluctantly got the hoe and walked back out to the potato patch. The cool of dawn was gone already; it was going to be hot again today, she could tell.

She had only dug up a few when John Woolman came out of the house to get his bedroll off the cabin porch. He seemed subdued, and waved at Ruth but did not speak. When it was rolled up he hoisted it over his shoulder, where a leather strap held it in place. Then he went back to the house.

Ruth kept glancing up at the house as she worked, to be sure and see when he left. It was not long until he came out to the gate. Richard Barton was at his side, looking grim. It was obvious his heart had not been softened yet. If anything, the morning's beginning had hardened it even more.

The two men shook hands stiffly, then Woolman opened the gate and walked toward the line of tall oak trees. Richard Barton did not watch him; he turned back to the house at once.

But Ruth was watching, and as the burdened figure disappeared behind the first of the trees, she felt something like panic rise up inside.

He's *leaving!* a voice cried out in her. He's going back to Philadelphia and New Jersey. And with him is going thy one chance to be free. Thy *one chance!*

Suddenly Ruth threw down the hoe. Something else had risen in her, an impulse she knew she would not deny. Woolman was going to a city where free Negroes could live undisturbed, a place far from and unlike Virginia.

Very well then, he must take her with him. *Yes!* She could be free and safe there. If John Woolman had walked all the way from Philadelphia to tell her about Negroes working there and going to school, he would help her.

Ruth ran back to the cabin. She quickly rolled up her faded quilt, and tied it with the sash from her tunic. Slinging it over her shoulder, she went

to the door and looked out carefully. Her mother was still in the house, making Richard Barton's bed and washing his breakfast dishes. Uncle Jacob was down by the stream fishing. No one would see her.

Ruth slipped around behind the cabin, through the corn patch and into the small tobacco field. Richard Barton would be out here working soon, but not yet, and she skimmed lightly through the rows to the rail fence at its border. Beyond the fence the land was overgrown and heavily wooded along the course of the stream, which wound through old man Hudnutt's land and then joined the river just below the ferry.

Ruth knew the woods well; she knew her uncle's favorite fishing spots too, and gave them a wide berth. Then she cut over to the edge of the stream, where there was a path, trod mostly by deer and other animals, which ran along the water as far as she had ever gone. She was sure it went all the way to the river.

She planned to follow the path to a place not far from the ford where the woods extended out to the road. She would catch up with John Woolman there, and he would take her with him.

Trotting along the path, Ruth mentally apologized to her mother and uncle. "I'm sorry I didn't even say goodbye," she told them, "but John Woolman has left and I had to catch him. And besides, you wouldn't have let me go if you knew, so I couldn't stop. I'll be back to visit some day. Or maybe after I'm free and can buy my own horse, I'll ride back and get you. Then you can be free too, mama, and it won't mean any trouble. So don't be sad, mama, don't cry because I'm gone."

The image of Abigail weeping over her disappearance slowed her down for a moment, but then she shook herself and pressed on.

"I have to go, mama," she said to Abigail silently. "If I'm going to be free, I have to catch him before he crosses the river. I don't know the way to Philadelphia."

Then she began to wonder about travelling with Woolman. Would Richard Barton come looking for her? Would he hire slave-catchers to hunt for her? Woolman would be easy to spot in his peculiar costume. What would Barton do to her if she was caught and brought back. Would he sell her? She remembered her mother's warning: "Thee doesn't know what slavery can be like. Thee has never been horsewhipped."

She shuddered at the thought of whipping. She was afraid of what could happen to her for running away, but still she didn't stop. If anything, thinking about the dangers of the trip only made her trot faster along the shaded path. When a doe and twin fawns jumped out of the bushes in front

of her and scampered off into the deeper brush, Ruth scarcely noticed them. Her mind was working too fast.

If John Woolman could find her some pants, she could disguise herself as a boy, and that would confuse the slavecatchers. He could tell people she belonged to him. And they could travel the wooded byways along the roads, hiding when necessary. Ruth felt confident that if they were careful and resourceful, they could make it to Philadelphia safely.

Now she was past the long Hudnutt tobacco fields, near where the stream joined the river. Ruth turned from the path and began working her way toward the road. Here the underbrush was thicker and more difficult to get through. Brambles scratched her skin and tugged at her quilt. Soon she was breathing hard, and she began to worry that the slower pace here would make her miss Woolman.

When she saw the bushes open before her on an incline going down to the roadway, her fears at first increased. She had judged her direction well, and was peering out over the road's final bend before it ran into the riverbank. People and wagons gathered at the water's edge to await the ferry, but no one was there now. She thought that might be because the ferry had just left; but a look across the water showed that the ferry was still tied up on the other bank. The ferryman had not arrived to make the day's first trip yet. Ruth sank back, relieved, into the bushes to wait.

In a few minutes she heard footsteps on the road. Looking out cautiously again, she saw that it was Woolman, his undyed breeches and boots already dusty, trudging steadily toward the river. As he passed her hiding place she spoke: "*John!* John Woolman!"

He stopped and turned, gazing quizzically up at the forest.

"*Here*!" she called again, trying to keep her voice down. "It's Ruth! Come up here, quickly!"

"Ruth?" Woolman asked. "What is thee doing here? All right, I'm coming." He clambered up the short slope to the trees, pushed through the bushes, and stood in the shade looking down at her.

"What brings thee here, child?" he asked again. "Is something wrong?" He took off his brown hat and wiped his sweaty brow as Ruth started her reply.

"No, nothing is wrong, John," she said breathlessly, her voice an insistent whisper. "I followed thee through the woods. I wanted to talk to thee some more. I–" she stumbled for a moment, suddenly afraid of what she was about to say, now that the time had come to actually say it. Then she forced herself to spill the words out.

"I want to go with thee, John, I want to go to Philadelphia and be free and go to school, and work for wages so I can buy my own horse. Take me to Philadelphia with thee, John."

There, it was all out, even the secret part about the horse.

Woolman had stopped wiping his forehead after her first statement, and now he put his hat back on his head, and she realized he was staring at her, dumbfounded. She couldn't bear the silence, and pushed more words into it.

"It won't be so hard, John. Thee can tell people I am they own slave, and if the slave-catchers come after me I can dress up in a boy's clothes and fool them. Or I can hide in the woods too, so they won't even see me. Thee doesn't need to worry. We can–"

She suddenly realized she was chattering like some crazy warbler in the quiet forest, and stopped. Woolman's astonished expression had not changed.

"Thee wants to come with me?" he asked, as if he had somehow not heard her correctly.

She nodded vigorously. "So thee thinks thee can walk to Philadelphia," he added, more positively. Her request was starting to sink in. She nodded again.

Woolman turned from her and sank down on his haunches, leaning against a broad tree trunk. He reached out, pulled up a long stalk of grass, stuck it in his mouth, and began chewing it absently. As he did so he was studying the girl's dark smooth face, so full now of eagerness and tension. Then he closed his eyes.

"John," Ruth said nervously, "*John*, we have no time to rest. The ferry will be coming soon–"

He raised a hand, stopping her in mid-sentence, but did not open his eyes. Then Ruth realized he was praying, in his silent, inward Quaker way. So she sat back, fidgeting nervously with a fallen oak leaf and watching him anxiously.

There was a noise from across the river, men's voices and ropes scraping pilings. Ruth knew it was the ferryman, untying his long raft and making ready to pole it across the river. From the sounds there were only one or two other people coming across with him.

John Woolman paid no attention to the sounds. Finally, after what seemed like hours, he opened his eyes again and refocussed them on her. They were troubled and sad, but decisive.

"Ruth," he said softly, "I cannot take thee with me. Thee must go back to they home, to thy mother and to Richard Barton."

Now it was Ruth who didn't seem to understand, though she, too, had heard the words quite clearly. "Go *back*?" she repeated, "why should I go back, John?"

Woolman had nodded at her first query, and now he waited again before responding. Into the silence between them came forest noises: trees rustling, a distant bird call. Patches of sunlight slipped through the canopy of leaves to move in a roughly circular pattern on the ground. And the ferryman, his voice closer, now laughed at some unheard joke by one of his passengers. Then Woolman spoke again.

"Ruth, thee is asking me to deceive these men who are coming across the river, and many more after them as well. Thee wants me to do something that Richard Barton can think of as no different from stealing or robbery. In truth, what thee wants me to do is as much against the laws of Virginia as robbery."

He shook his head. "That is not my way, Ruth. I came here to change Richard Barton's heart, not to overpower him and spirit thee away like a prize of war."

Now Ruth realized what he was telling her. And after the disbelief, anger rose quickly to her lips. She felt herself speaking with a depth of feeling beyond her years, as if she could see her life laid out before her.

"But what about *my heart*, John? Thee said it was God's will for slaves like me to be free. Isn't God's will more important than Richard Barton's? And if it's a crime to help me escape slavery, what kind of a crime is it to leave me in it? Isn't he stealing my labor, even my life, day by day? How can it be wrong to help me get away from there?"

Woolman faltered under this young woman's burning gaze and impassioned words. He peered down at the ground, where the patches of light were moving. He began shaking his head slowly.

"Thee speaks well," he conceded. "Thee cuts to my heart. But I prayed for guidance just now, and my leading, though it is heavy, is clear. This is not my way, Ruth. I have labored with the Friends who own slaves for twenty years, praying with them and for them, visiting them, exhorting them. While many of them, like Richard, have not yet been moved, many other have freed their Negroes."

He fingered his hat, then lifted it to wipe again at his beaded brow. "I don't believe, Ruth, that slavery can be ended in these colonies without the slaveowners, at least the greater number of them, seeing the error of it and agreeing to its removal. To come to their homes as Friends and then by stealth to help their slaves escape, that can only make their hearts harder."

He sighed, and looked at the ground again. “I can’t do it, Ruth. I am afraid to think where it would lead.”

Ruth had listened to his scruples with growing fury.

“Then what does that mean for me?” she demanded. “Am I to wait patiently until God changes Richard Barton’s heart? I heard him tell thee he would *never* free us while he is alive, and my mother said the same thing. Even after he dies we could all be split up and sold. I could be an old woman by then. My children would all be born slaves. And then how long would *they* have to wait?”

Woolman was shaking his head again, unable to meet her eyes. “I can’t speak for God, Ruth,” he said slowly. “I can only do what I can and what I am led to do. I know that it isn’t enough, and for the rest I can only ask God’s forgiveness. God’s . . . and yours.”

He closed his eyes again, and leaned his head back against the tree. Suddenly he began to sniffle; a tear trickled out from under his eyelids.

Ruth leaped up.

“Thee does *not* have my forgiveness for sending me back to a slave’s life,” she cried, heedless now of the ferry’s approach. “And save thy tears for some Friend’s parlor, where thee can speak comfortably of the will of God for others between tea and supper. I can cry for myself when the time comes. And it will; *thee* knows it will!”

The ferry scraped to a muddy halt against the bank of the river, and Ruth heard a man call to a horse as he led it off the raft onto the road. Suddenly the horse whinnied, and was answered by another horse somewhere around the bend in the road. Then Ruth heard the clap of hoofs and other voices approaching, familiar voices.

The Hudnutt boys! They were coming to the ferry. If they saw her here with Woolman, away from the farm, they would know something was afoot. It would not take long for them to guess the truth, and then they or people like them would be after her at once.

Ruth couldn’t stand the idea of those beautiful horses galloping after her, ridden by the two brothers with their long shiny muskets. She picked up her rolled quilt and dropped her voice to a fierce whisper.

“All right, John Woolman, there’s thy ferry to get thee on thy way to Philadelphia. Thee could still hide here with me til the Hudnutt boys went away and we could ride it across on the next trip. But otherwise thee had better go or thee will miss it.”

Woolman looked up at her now, out of his pathetic tear-rimmed eyes. Her own expression was hard and bitter. He wiped at his eyes,

streaking his cheeks with dirt, and stood up heavily. Shouldering his bedroll, he mumbled, "Yes, thee is right, I must go."

As soon as he turned toward the road, Ruth fled from him, and from the other white men with their horses, deeper into the thick brush. She felt sure they would suspect when they saw his strange figure emerge from the trees, and in her panic she imagined them riding into the forest after her right then.

She was surprised instead to hear them break into raucous laughter, and even as she plunged on toward the stream and its path, she understood that they had noticed only his ridiculous costume. Their crude glee in its peculiarity kept them from thinking of anything else long enough for him to get on the ferry, and Ruth to get well out of earshot.

She was halfway back to the farm, still trotting along the path, when all at once uncle Jacob stepped out from behind a tree and grabbed her.

Ruth let out a shriek and covered her face. Then when she realized who it was, she began to cry.

"Where has thee *been,* Ruth?" Jacob asked. "Thy mother and I have been looking for thee. Abigail is worried, and so was I."

Between sobs, Ruth told him what had happened. The suddenness of his appearance had focused all her terror into one shuddering outpouring. Behind it she felt a current of relief, as if she had just been pulled back from the edge of a cliff or snatched from some similar disaster. In the face of such emotions, she couldn't help but tell the truth.

Uncle Jacob held her in his arms, as she remembered him doing when she was much smaller. When she finished she looked up at him. His old face was grave, but not angry. "Thee was wrong to run away from us, Ruth," he said quietly. "But it was not wrong to want what thee wanted, even if it can't be."

He pulled out a ragged handkerchief from a pocket somewhere and wiped her face. "I think it will be all right if we do not speak of this to thy mother. I will tell Abigail thee got lost in the woods, and I found thee asleep under a tree. Thee needn't say anything. If that is a lie, it is mine and not thine. Then thee had best go hoe some potatoes. Abigail needs them to make supper."

Ruth felt purged now by her tears and she rested for a few more minutes against Jacob's chest, breathing deeply and not thinking. Then she began to feel like herself again, and wanted to stand up. After all she was not a child; she was much too old to be cradled like a baby.

"I'm ready to go back now," she told him.

Uncle Jacob stood up and brushed the dirt and twigs from his pants. “Let’s go, then,” he said, and they walked down the path together.

When they came to the spot by the stream where Jacob had left his fishing line, he stooped over the edge and pulled it out of the water. There were three large catfish hanging on it, left there in the water to keep cool while he was hunting for her.

He held them up for Ruth to admire. “We’ll have a fine dinner tonight,” he said, stepping back on the path toward home. “I’ll cook these myself, and we won’t share any of them with Richard.” He grinned at her, and there was something a little secretive about it, so that Ruth for a second could imagine what he may have been like as a boy her age, so many years before she was born.

Then, after they had walked a few more minutes, with the fish swinging rhythmically between them, Jacob added, “And I think, Ruth, that after dinner tonight, I will begin to teach thee how to read. I have thought about it, as I said I would, and perhaps thee was right. Perhaps it is about time.”

Now Ruth was able to grin a little bit too. “Can we start with the story of Moses and the Children of Israel in Egypt?” she asked.