

Dusky Lading

To the tourist, who mayhap has passed through the quiet village of Springdale, it may seem incredible that there, once upon a time, was a station on the Underground Railroad; that in some of those very fields and orchards escaping negro slaves hid in fright with their pursuers in sickening nearness, and that in some of those homes they were fed and sheltered and helped upon their way. The smooth, broad road, the swift automobile, the many-shaded green checkerboard of cultivated fields, the spacious houses, the well-kept lawns — all these and many more were missing from the picture then.

Imagine a road, narrow, rough with ruts, partially overgrown with sod, bordered on either side by fields of corn and wheat occasionally enclosed by zig-zag rail fences, while in the vales the waist-high grass betokened virgin prairie. Some of this rank grass had sharp rough blades which would lacerate the skin in smarting scratches. As the long grass swayed in waves of sheenful beauty, there may have been billows caused not by breeze, but by crawling, hunted dusky forms; and as the tassels of the state-ly corn quivered and the leaves rustled, crouching black men may have given thanks for the protection of its tall growth.

At that time not every one in Iowa thought that

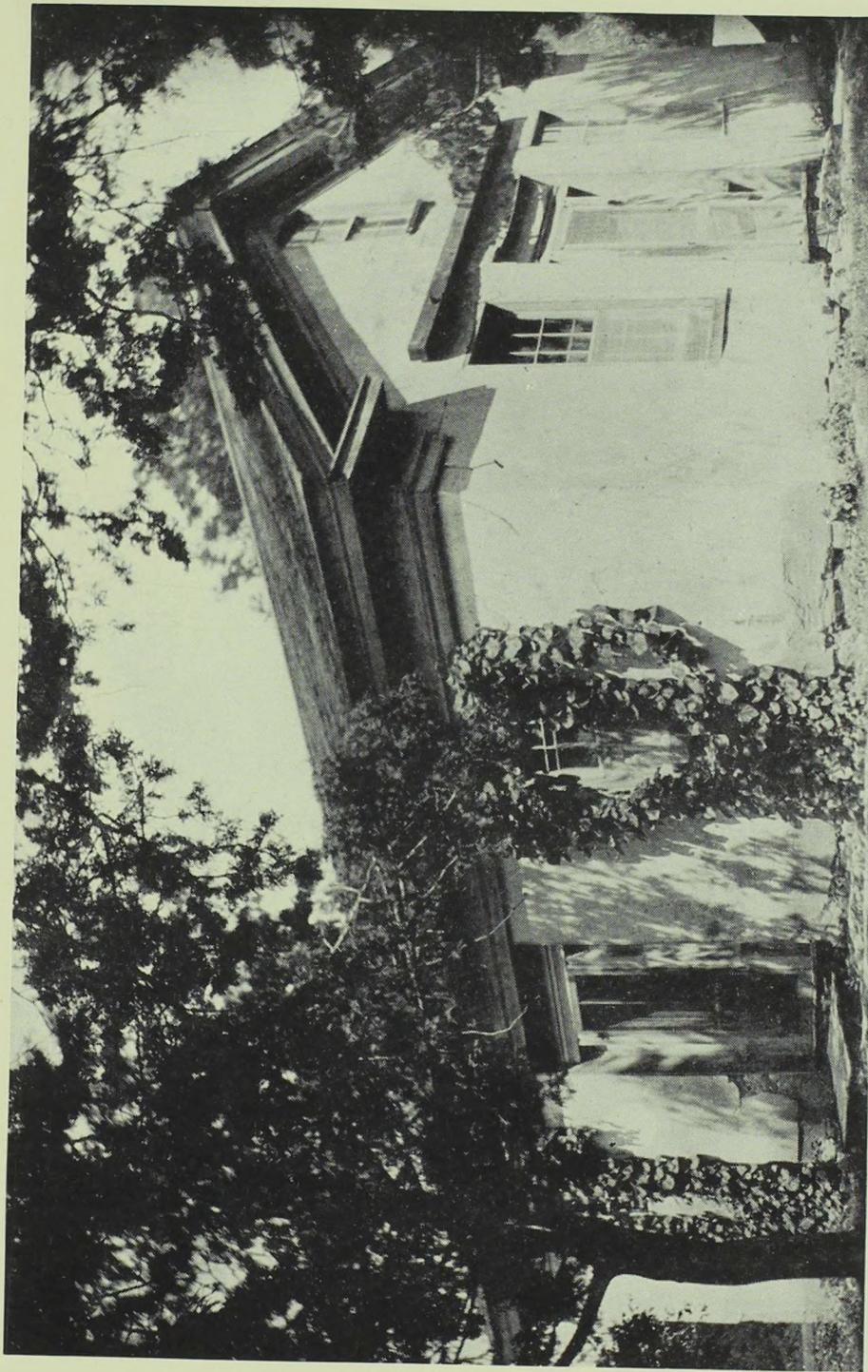
the slaves should be free. On the contrary many believed that slavery was an institution, which, if they preferred not to practise themselves, was perfectly legal and perhaps justifiable in the South. Those who knew of slavery as practised with moderation, undoubtedly thought there was no occasion to get unduly exercised about it. Most people in Iowa, however, were opposed to slavery whether the conditions of the slave were good or bad. This anti-slavery sentiment centered particularly about the New England village of Denmark, and the Quaker settlements of Salem and Springdale. In spite of the fact that assisting a slave to escape was in violation of the federal law, these people risked heavy fines and imprisonment by doing so.

How the news spread, no one can say, but slaves in Missouri soon learned that there were friends in Iowa upon whom they could rely if they should attempt to escape their bondage. From house to house they could make their way by night and hide in the fields by day. The main line of the Underground Railroad (for there were numerous branches and spur lines) entered Iowa at the southwestern corner near Tabor, and passed through Lewis, Des Moines, Grinnell, Iowa City, West Liberty, Tipton, DeWitt, Low Moor, and Clinton, whence it crossed the Mississippi River to join a like system in Illinois. It was not really a railroad, nor yet a tunnel, but a route, on which there were families who were willing to make their homes a station, and who could be

depended upon to do their best in forwarding the passenger, or members of the runaway group. The greatest of secrecy was necessary for the master of the slaves was often in hot pursuit.

That the Quakers, who by nature are peace-loving and law-abiding citizens, should have become parties to such a system seems strange indeed. But these Quakers heeded spiritual rather than temporal laws, and they believed that to fail in helping to liberate a slave was to fail to keep the law of God. They were virtuous in their violation of the law; they believed implicitly that it was their duty. As one of their precepts forbids the bearing of arms or engaging in combat, their reputation was a strategic advantage, which at this time aided them greatly in their work. Although the Quakers of Salem are most often mentioned in connection with the Underground Railroad, those of Springdale and West Branch played heroic parts also.

The operators of the Underground Railroad were altogether too shrewd to keep any records of the organization or its activities. Neither personnel, stations, nor schedules were known to the public. They knew full well that such a record might prove to be evidence which could be used against them. Hence the only information available is that which has been handed down by word of mouth from the generation which took part in the stirring events of that day. As is usual when stories have been told and retold, the main content of the tale may remain



COURTESY OF BETH MATHER HIGBEE

THE OLD JOHN BROWN HOUSE

unchanged, but the embroidery of detail may alter with subsequent telling.

It is said that many negroes found refuge and help in and about Springdale. They would lie hidden in cornfields or other suitable hiding places during the day, resting, because to travel in the daylight was very dangerous. Then when night had come, they would resume their journey, being guided by the north star. Nearly all had weapons of some sort, possibly a butcher knife, or small arms. Often they very narrowly evaded capture even at the stations on the Railroad.

One man had in his home a basement room which was cozily fitted out with a fireplace, about which the family was accustomed to gather in the evenings. When this family began to befriend fugitive slaves they used this room to conceal their secret visitors. Pursuers often came to the house, but none ever ventured to open the door and start down the stairs toward that basement room, knowing that to do so would be certain death, for, outlined against the light he would be a splendid target for the desperate slaves concealed in the darkness below.

The Quaker might not hesitate to break the law by concealing "niggers" and helping them escape, but he would not lie about it. He might evade the truth, but if it were at all possible he would not disregard it altogether. A story is told of William Maxson, who was not a Quaker by birth. He thought to help some negroes to Canada by putting them in sacks

and shipping them as potatoes — at least the official records of the railroad would be clear. The station agent, who was supposed to be opposed to such work, was present when they were loaded into a box car. While thus busily engaged, one of the sacks of potatoes sneezed, much to the consternation of Mr. Maxson. He later said he did not know what was going to happen then. But the station agent, if not in sympathy was at least not antagonistic; so the “potatoes” were sent upon their way, and it is presumed that they eventually arrived safely at their destination.

At one time a number of fugitives had been concealed at the home of Laurie Tatum. When conditions seemed right for a “fitting” Mr. Tatum loaded them into his wagon, covered them so that an observer would never suspect the true character of the load, and set out for Mechanicsville, where he hoped to deliver them into other kind hands. To reach Mechanicsville it was necessary to cross the Cedar River at Gray’s Ford, and it so happened that at this point the river sometimes formed beds of quicksand. There misfortune overtook Mr. Tatum in his enterprise, for his wagon stuck in the shifting sand. There was nothing to do but secure help. He could scarcely risk apprehension by asking one or more of the negroes to get out, so he decided to go to the nearest house for the aid he so greatly desired. The man of the house was a stranger, which did not decrease Mr. Tatum’s concern. After in-

specting the slowly sinking wagon, the stranger suggested they would have to unload. Immediately Mr. Tatum replied that he did not think that would be necessary at all. "What do you have on your wagon?" asked the stranger. Mr. Tatum looked him squarely in the eye and said, "Meat and wool." Possibly the stranger comprehended the full meaning of the reply. At any rate he complied with Mr. Tatum's wish; they secured a fence rail from one of the old worm fences close at hand, got it under the wheels, and at length succeeded in raising the wagon to higher and firmer ground.

How many times these quiet, unassuming Quakers must have put themselves at the mercy of strangers! How sincerely they must have believed in the thing they were doing! Not only the men risked fines and imprisonment by assisting runaways, but the women also helped, many times by clever ruses.

Little Anna Varney, who lived about two miles west of Springdale on the old stage road from Iowa City to Davenport, thought it strange no doubt that she should so often be unceremoniously hustled off to spend the night or the afternoon at the home of a neighbor. Perhaps she sensed an undercurrent of excitement which her parents tried to suppress. Could it be connected with these strangers who came in the darkness, and whom she never really saw but sometimes heard? Instinctively she realized that it must be something about which her mother did not wish to speak, and so she did not ask.

One quiet Sunday afternoon there came a light tap at the door. Immediately Anna was given permission to go to the neighbor's house to play. As soon as she had gone, her mother admitted a negro woman with two children, one white and one black. The negress was very much frightened and in great distress. She was running away with her two children, who were sons of the master. Not far behind the master was in swift pursuit. Astride his horse, he was beating down the tall grass of the swamp with his whip, thinking that possibly the fugitives were concealed there.

The negro mother, who seemed to be more intelligent than the usual lot, told Mrs. Varney that her white boy made them conspicuous, and that she very much feared they would be overtaken, for it would be so easy to identify them. Mrs. Varney had an inspiration. If she could report not having seen a negro woman with two boys, one black and the other white, the owner might be thrown off the trail. Quickly she put a quantity of tea to steep upon the stove and allowed it to become very, very strong. With this solution she stained all the visible parts of the white boy a walnut-brown color and, after a refreshing lunch, sent them upon their way. About three months later, it is said, Mrs. Varney received a letter from this woman whom she had befriended, which told of their safe arrival in Canada.

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