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# **Mean to Be Free**

**A Flight North on the Underground Railroad**

By Joanna Halpert Kraus

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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

HEDY: Age nine  
TOM: Age eleven  
MISS NANCY: Wife to the owner of the Tidewater, Maryland plantation. She is quick tempered, self-centered and determined to have her own way on all plantation matters.  
MOSES: (Harriet Tubman), a former slave in her mid-thirties, short and plain in appearance. Now she is a conductor on the Underground Railroad. She is deeply religious.  
LINDA: Age seventeen, formerly a lady's maid on a plantation. She is delicate and spoiled.  
JOE: In his mid-thirties. A former overseer of a plantation. He is handsome, hard working and has an innate sense of dignity.  
THOMAS GARRETT: A devout Quaker whose house has become one of the stops on the Underground Railroad.  
SARAH GARRETT: His wife.  
TWO MEN: They search for fugitive slaves in order to collect the reward money.  
TWO BRICKLAYERS  
ONE POLICEMAN  
OLIVER JOHNSON: Head of the Anti-Slavery Office in New York City.  
RAILROAD CONDUCTOR

NOTE: Throughout the play, it is suggested that a guitarist sit on the side of the stage accompanying the few songs that are sung by individual members of the cast. It is also suggested that he provide background music during the escape scene and during set changes.

## SETTINGS

ACT ONE      Scene 1      A Tidewater Maryland plantation just before the Civil War, autumn, 1857.  
                 Scene 2      A grass swamp area in Maryland at night a week later  
ACT TWO      Scene 1      Thomas Garrett's small Quaker house in Wilmington, Del., two days later just before dawn  
                 Scene 2      The outskirts of Wilmington the next day  
                 Scene 3      Oliver Johnson's Anti-Slavery office in New York City a week later  
                 Scene 4      The Railroad train bound for Niagara Falls, Ontario, the next day

ACT ONE

Scene 1

SETTING:

A Tidewater, Maryland plantation, just before the Civil War, 1857. A backdrop, if used, would suggest fields of hay and stacked cornfields. On stage there is a windowless log cabin, its chinks filled with mud, which serves as the laundry cabin. The entrance to it is merely an opening in the wall. Inside there are huge washtubs, scrub boards, etc. It is an autumn, Saturday afternoon.

AT RISE:

HEDY, age nine, drags a heavy wash tub over to a pile of sheets. She kneels and begins the laborious chore of scrubbing the sheets clean.

TOM

(TOM, age eleven, enters, terrified. He sinks on the floor beside HEDY. His shirt is bloody and torn. He is half crying)

Hedy!

HEDY

Tom!

(Stops her work)

What happened?

TOM

Hedy, it hurts bad. You gotta help me. He used the whip.

HEDY

How many times?

TOM

PLENTY!

HEDY

(Lifts his shirt gingerly)

Here, I'll wash it off for you.

(During the next few speeches, she cleans the wound)

HEDY (Cont'd)

Tom, you get into any more trouble and they're gonna sell you down river....tie your hands and feet to a big rope, the way they did Old Jim. Who beat you?

TOM

Master Ed.

HEDY

Master Ed! What'd you do?

TOM

All I done was take a peach. It was there hangin' on the bough. Big and juicy. Just waitin' to be 'et. I was hungry. Real hungry. There it was. Wasn't anyone around. Oh, I know I shouldn't have done it.

HEDY

(Shocked)

You mean that peach tree near the Big House window?

(TOM nods)

But that's Miss Nancy's own tree. She planted it herself. I heard Mama say so.

TOM

It was quiet. All the white folks were having lunch. I could smell the food. Didn't think no one could see me. But Miss Nancy, she looked out the window and screamed, "Robber! Robber!" And Master Ed came out with his whip... with his whip, Hedy.

HEDY

Mama told you not to go near the Big House. And you shouldn't steal, Tom. Mama told you that.

(HEDY finishes wiping the wound)

Does it feel better, Tom?

TOM

(Nods)

Thanks, Hedy.

(MISS NANCY sweeps in. TOM moves away.  
HEDY conceals cloth)

MISS NANCY

I thought I heard a boy's voice down here. A familiar boy's voice.

(To HEDY)

Looks to me like there's plenty of work to do, Hedy. And talking doesn't get it done.

HEDY

Yes, Miss Nancy.

(HEDY begins scrubbing again)

MISS NANCY

(To TOM)

So this is the way you repay Master Ed for feeding and clothing you year after year. First, you steal. Now, you stop Hedy from doing her work. You should be ashamed of yourself.

(TOM doesn't answer)

But I can see you're not. Well, I'll see to it, Tom, that you get another lesson from Master Ed, one you won't forget so easily!

(Her anger mounts)

A boy like you should be sold!

(Pause, says to herself)

I'll tell him this afternoon.

(To Hedy)

Hedy, remember those sheets have to dry in the sunlight. You'll have to work a lot faster than you are now. Meanwhile, Tom, get a wash basin and help your sister until I get back. You've made her lose enough time already.

(MISS NANCY exits. HEDY gets a wash basin for TOM)

HEDY

Oh, Tom. SOLD! Then, we'd never ever see you again. She couldn't mean that. Maybe if you work real hard this afternoon and help me finish, she'll forget about talkin' to Master Ed.

TOM

No, Hedy. She ain't the kind to forget. And I ain't doin' no laundry either. That's women's work. Miss Nancy knows no man does that kind of work. She knows that, but she told me to do it, just the same. She's just a ...

HEDY

SH-H-H, Tom! She might come back and hear you!

(Sound of whippoorwill)

TOM

(Excited)

Hedy, do you know what that is?

HEDY

Sure. A bird down by the river.

MISS NANCY

(Offstage)

Hedy, I better not find you talking instead of washing.

(HEDY quickly continues to scrub the sheets)

HEDY

C'mon, Tom. Won't you help me finish?

TOM

(Looks around to make sure they're alone)

That's a whippoorwill, Hedy.

HEDY

(Scared)

Mama says that sound means death, cause a whippoorwill doesn't ever sing down by the river.

TOM

That sound ain't no bird, Hedy.

(Whispers)

That's Moses calling.

HEDY

WHO? MOSES! Moses is in the Bible. Mama taught me that. You're just trying to fool me. Moses lived some hundred and thousands of years ago.

TOM

Not that one, Hedy. And don't say the same so loud. She's a woman livin' now. And she takes people North, underground, and when they come up, they're all free and safe and happy.

HEDY

You're crazy, Tom.

TOM

No, I ain't. Listen, Hedy.

(TOM comes close to HEDY to tell her the amazing tale)

I hear the old men talking, late at night. They say Moses is tall, tallest woman in the world. They say she can see things a l-o-n-g way off, even in the dark, just like a bat. They say she can run faster than rabbits, climb trees like a possum, jump over fences, and fly over streams.... and that she can hear a patroller sneeze twenty miles away. There's a price on her head....but ain't no one can catch her.

(Sound of whippoorwill.  
TOM gets the idea)

And Hedy ..... listen, Hedy, I'm gonna run away with her... tonight!

HEDY

(Looks around to see if they were overheard)

Tom, if you run away, they'll send the dogs after you and they'll find you and eat you.

TOM

They won't catch me. Not with Moses.

HEDY

But Master Ed says the people up North fatten up runaway slaves and then they eat them.

TOM

He just says that to keep us all from runnin' away. Hedy, do you want to scrub sheets all your life?

(HEDY shakes her head)

Then, come with me. We could make it together.

HEDY

(Looks around again)

Ain't it dangerous Tom, to run away? Besides there's Mama and Papa. Anyway, how you gonna get past, Miss Nancy? She'll be back any minute.

TOM

If they're gonna sell me anyway, Hedy, I ain't got nothin' to lose. If they sell me down river, I'll never get away..... ever. Now's my only chance.

(Tries to persuade her)

Hedy... Hedy, don't you want to make Mama and Papa proud of you? Do somethin' beside scrubbin' sheets?

HEDY

(Gently)

Oh, Tom, what could I do?

TOM

You could go to school, Hedy. And then you could send Mama and Papa a letter and tell 'em we're fine. And then.....

HEDY

(Interrupts, laughing)

They can't read, and we can't write. Who you foolin'?

TOM

But we could learn. Oh, Hedy, come with me. Up North all the children go to school...girls too.

(Sound of whippoorwill. TOM tries to persuade HEDY)

Hedy, it's Saturday. That's the day Moses always starts. They can't print no poster about us on a Sunday, so we'd get at least one day's start.

(Convincing her)

And Hedy, when we're free, then we could help Mama and Papa and we could all have a nice little house together.

(She puts the sheets down thoughtfully)

HEDY

(Rises)

Could we really help Mama and Papa come North? Really? And all have a nice house together?

TOM

(Confident)

Sure we can. Besides there'll be people up there to help us.

HEDY

And could I really learn to read and write, Tom?

TOM

Sure you could, Hedy. But you'll never get a chance to learn down here.

(HEDY stands uncertainly)

Hedy...Hedy, if you don't come with me, now, I might never see you. Never! Never again!

(TOM crosses to entrance to see if

MISS NANCY is in sight. Whispers)

Hedy, now's my chance. Miss Nancy's just gone inside the Big House. I gotta go now. If they see me goin' I'm as good as dead.

(TOM starts out)

HEDY

wait. Wait for me, Tom. I'm comin' too.

(Softly)

Goodbye, old sheets. Goodbye, forever!

TOM

Quick, Hedy. NOW!

(TOM grabs her hand. The curtains close)

(The escape is choreographed. Their movements are tense, punctuated with the sound of the whippoorwill. Several times they think they are being followed. Finally they reach their destination and collapse near the riverbank. There are clumps of bushes along the bank)

HEDY

You go on alone, Tom. I can't. I've got to stop and rest. I bet Moses went on. We've walked for hours.

TOM

You can't stop now, Hedy.

HEDY

Sh. Down there. Who's that?

(They crouch down. Slowly a shape comes toward them. MOSES enters. She has a deep scar on her forehead like a dent and old scars on the back of her neck. She is thirty-seven years old, five feet tall and has a rich-husky voice. She calls like a whippoorwill)

TOM

(Whispers)

Are you Moses?

MOSES

(Nods)

What are you children doing down here? Down here by the river bank this time of night. It's dangerous. Your mama and papa gonna be mighty worried.

TOM

(Rises)

We wanna go with you.

MOSES

Go? Where, child? Just where do you think I'm plannin' on going?

HEDY

Oh, Tom, she's not gonna take us. You said she was the tallest woman in the world and she'd take us North, and you were wrong the whole time.

(Starts to cry)

MOSES

(Bends down. Sees HEDY's feet are torn and bleeding. Lifts them)

You done come a long way, child, to find me.

TOM

We been looking for you all night. We ran away from home. You gotta take us.

MOSES

Is that any way to ask a question? Why'd you run away?

(TOM looks embarrassed)

HEDY

Tom stole a peach. That's why, and Master Ed beat him!

MOSES

(Notices wound, says gently)

You won't get far stealin' Tom.

TOM

(Humbly)

I know.

HEDY

And then, Miss Nancy said she was gonna sell Tom!

TOM

(Pleading)

Moses, please take us with you! We want a chance to grow up free. If I go back to Master Ed now, he'll sell me down river, and I'll never have another chance to get away. We mean to be free, Hedy and me.

MOSES

And once you get free, what do you mean to do?

TOM

I mean to be somebody...Not like Master Ed neither. But somebody I'm proud of...inside. And Hedy's gonna be a lady. A fine lady. And she's gonna learn to read and write along with me, and...

MOSES

(interrupts laughing)

well, now before you two children turn into the finest lady and the smartest gentleman that this world ever seen, we gotta get north first.

(Looks at the two small figures before her, uncertain that they can make the hard journey)

But this freedom train is goin' a long way. And the road ain't easy. You've got to sleep by day, walk by night. And never let folks know you're about. Watch me. You'll learn to hide as well as I can. You gotta walk so quiet that there's not even a sound of your bare feet on the earth. When you sleep, you gotta be so quiet that there's not a sound of breathing. Not a cough or a sneeze. Once this train starts, ain't no turning back.

TOM

Don't want to go back...ever!

HEDY

EVER.

MOSES

You're sure?

TOM

We're sure.

(HEDY nods)

MOSES

(Looks up at sky)

It's near daylight. We'll wait right here. There'll be two coming to meet me here.

(Thoughtfully takes out pistol)

And I reckon there'll be a heavy price on the man's head.

TOM

Is that why you got a pistol?

MOSES

To protect us all, Tom. So no one falls off this train.

(Points to North Star)

Got to follow that star, and it's a long way off yet.

(Crouches in the bushes, so she can barely be seen. HEDY crouches down beside her)

HEDY

How can you tell if you're looking at the right one?

MOSES

That's easy. The star up there never moves. It doesn't rise in the East or set in the West as the other stars seem to. Anyone walking toward it could use it as a guide, because it never moves.

(To TOM and HEDY)

Come on, children. You've got to melt in with the bushes.

TOM

Then you will take us?

HEDY

PLEASE!

MOSES

I never said "NO," yet.

(They hug each other, then exit)

ACT ONEScene 2SETTING:

A grass swamp area.  
There is an oak tree with Spanish moss in the center. There are the noises of the swamp at night and the swish of the river against the bank.

AT RISE:

JOE enters, followed by LINDA. JOE is in his mid-thirties, handsome, muscular, and a former overseer of a plantation. LINDA is 17, delicate, spoiled and a former lady's maid on a large plantation.

LINDA

(Sits down)

Joe, I'm not walkin' another step. I'm tired. We been walkin' and hidin' for a week now, since we met up with Moses and the two children. If she's so good at gettin' people North, how come there ain't no more along? And how come we ain't there yet? I think the old women's crazy.

JOE

She ain't crazy, Linda, so none of that foolish talk. Why, a week's nothing. Sometimes it takes months.

(Sits beside her)

Nothing's happened to us yet either, Linda, remember that. You and me gotta be careful. Remember we run away. I was hired out to be overseer of a plantation, and you were right there in the Big House as a lady's maid. They're gonna be looking for us - soon - if they ain't looking already. There's no turning back just cause your feet's sore. It's a miracle we ain't dead, LINDA. If it weren't for Moses, we would be. She sure do know where to hide out.

LINDA

(Sarcastically)

Strange houses where we hide in secret rooms, or in potato holes in cabins, or sleeping all day in a hollowed out haystack in the fields. I thought I was gonna die from chokin' in that stuff. I've had enough.

JOE

But you didn't die. She knows what she's doing.

LINDA

Joe, it ain't a woman's job to lead us, it don't make no sense.