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The Great Escape From Slavery of Ellen and William Craft

Passing as a white man traveling with his servant, two slaves fled their masters in a thrilling tale of deception and intrigue



One of the most ingenious escapes from slavery was that of a married couple from Georgia, Ellen and William Craft. (The Granger Collection, New York)

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Baltimore, the last major stop before Pennsylvania, a free state, had a particularly vigilant border patrol. Ellen and William were again detained, asked to leave the train and report to the authorities for verification of ownership. “We shan’t let you go,” an officer said with finality. “We felt as though we had come into deep waters and were about being overwhelmed,” William recounted in the book, and returned “to the dark and horrible pit of misery.” Ellen and William silently prayed as the officer stood his ground. Suddenly the jangling of the departure bell shattered the quiet. The officer, clearly agitated, scratched his head. Surveying the sick traveler’s bandages, he said to a clerk, “he is not well, it is a pity to stop him.” Tell the conductor to “let this gentleman and slave pass.”

The Crafts arrived in Philadelphia the next morning—Christmas Day. As they left the station, Ellen burst into tears, crying out, “Thank God, William, we’re safe!”

The comfortable coaches and cabins notwithstanding, it had been an emotionally harrowing journey, especially for Ellen as she kept up the multilayered deception. From making excuses for not partaking of brandy and cigars with the other gentleman to worrying that slavers had kidnapped William, her nerves were frayed to the point of exhaustion. At a Virginia railway station, a woman had even mistaken William for her runaway slave and demanded that he come with her. As predicted, abolitionists approached William. One advised him to “leave that cripple and have your liberty,” and a free black man on the train to Philadelphia urged him to take refuge in a boarding house run by abolitionists. Through it all Ellen and William maintained their roles, never revealing anything of themselves to the strangers except a loyal slave and kind master.

Upon their arrival in Philadelphia, Ellen and William were quickly given assistance and lodging by the underground abolitionist network. They received a reading lesson their very first day in the city. Three weeks later, they moved to Boston where William resumed work as a cabinetmaker and Ellen became a seamstress. After two years, in 1850, slave hunters arrived in Boston intent on returning them to Georgia. The Crafts fled again, this time to England, where they eventually had five children. After 20 years they returned to the States and in the 1870s established a school in Georgia for newly freed blacks.

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