

## LINCOLN'S PROMISE

by Gwendolyn T. Poole

Seventeen-year-old Jacob pulled his jacket closer around his slender frame and stood at the edge of the yard near the horse barn. It was a cold December day that held the promise of snow. But something else was in the air on the Fuller plantation. This farm just west of the Shenandoah Valley was known for its corn, wheat, soybeans, and tobacco. Although James Fuller owned only sixteen slaves, he ran his farm as a well-oiled machine. He was not a harsh master, but relied heavily on his overseer, Peters, to keep the field slaves in line, while Mrs. Fuller managed the house slaves. Jacob watched as the others moved about with certain energy, eagerness.

The women moved quickly between the cookhouse and the Big House, carrying pots and baskets of canned vegetables that had been put up during harvest time, and cured hams from the butchered hogs. The aromas that wafted from the cookhouse were mouth-watering. It seemed that the cooks had been working feverishly for weeks. Mistress Fuller had demanded the best of food, along with plenty of wine for her guests. The petite redhead commanded her seamstress make a new gown suitable for each occasion. She wanted her parties to be talked about well into 1863, despite the distractions of the skirmishes and battles to the east.

Invitations had been sent to all the prominent citizens of the region. The menus had been determined; the house was spotless, and the exquisitely decorated Christmas tree gave the aroma of pine throughout the foyer, library and parlor of the Fullers' stately farmhouse. Mrs. Fuller allowed her young children, Michael and Anna, to hang their handmade ornaments alongside her elaborate decorations on the tree. This holiday season, like those in previous years, brought about a festive atmosphere. Despite the news of battles in neighboring counties along the Valley, Mistress Fuller moved forward with her plans to host the most splendid holiday affairs. She waited for this all year.

Since the day the tree had been set up in the parlor of the Big House, the mood of the Fuller family changed toward the slaves. Mistress Fuller, though still demanding, seemed less harsh in dealing with the house slaves. Mr. Fuller allowed their children to play with the slave children. They followed him as he made his way down to the slave quarters. Jacob saw Massa Fuller reach into the pocket of his jacket and take out a sweet treat for the children. They gleefully gathered around the red-faced, portly man, accepted the treat, and scampered away.

Massa Fuller greeted many slaves by name: William, Dottie, Lisbet, Susie, Jeremiah, and on down the line. They smiled and responded with a hand wave, nod or a cheerful "hello," then continued with their duties, happy to hear their names called in a positive light and not regarding being reprimanded. Edna, the only slave on the entire plantation who was bold enough to initiate a conversation with her master and actually look him in the face, came around the side of a cabin with a bucket. Surprised, the matronly woman asked, "Massa Fuller, what brings you down to the quarters?" Edna gave her usual wide smile that radiated across her smooth brown face, then tucked the loose end of her thin head rag.

"Well, hello, Edna. Just came to see how things are coming along for the festivities. The Missus is all in a dither to be sure all is done to perfection." Mr. Fuller purchased Edna near on eight years ago. She was feisty from the beginning, showing respect for her new owner, but not fear. She spoke up for the concerns of the other slaves and could engage in easy banter with Massa Fuller. He permitted this much to his wife's disapproval. This "unnatural" relationship bothered the overseer as well, since Edna often bypassed him and took any concerns directly to Fuller. Jacob could not hear their conversation. He could tell by their demeanor that it was light. Edna entered the cabin as Fuller continued his stroll through the quarters, puffing on his pipe.

Jacob blew warm breath into his cupped hands, rubbed them together and turned his attention to the horses in the barn. The familiar smell of warm animals and straw permeated his nostrils. The stalls had been cleaned out and the stallion, the one Massa called Baldwin for his mother's family, seemed restless. "Shhh," whispered Jacob as he brushed the shiny black coat. Baldwin was a beautiful animal and Massa paid a pretty penny for him. "I's restless too, Baldwin," Jacob confided. "I watch you when I take you out to the pasture. You run like the wind, letting the breeze lick your face and stir up your mane. Sometimes you just stand there, taking in all that open space, breathing in the fresh air and the smell of the earth. I envy you. I envy the freedom you have. You is free, Baldwin, free. I wants my freedom too, more than anything. They say President Lincoln wrote up a paper, a proclamation that say all slaves will be free soon. He 'spose to sign that paper in a few days. But how can I trust that, Baldwin? White men have promised to free slaves before, even at war about this slavery thing right this minute, but that's no guarantee we be free. If'n Lincoln's plan don't work, I gots my plan. I's plannin' on running sure as the sun gonna shine, sure as the wind gonna blow, I's goin' up North." At that moment, Baldwin whinnied and bobbed his head in agreement.

Jacob wasn't the only one who had watched the exchange between Mr. Fuller and Edna. Overseer Peters leaned against a tree, watching Baxter and William, with axes in hand, drag a heavy tree log across the field toward the yard. The two field slaves had chopped down the biggest log they could find, knowing that as long as the Yule log burned and there was plenty of liquor, Massa Fuller would continue his jovial mood. Peters looked again at the two men with their floppy hats making their way slowly across the field and remembered a statement he made to Mr. Fuller some time ago that he didn't "trust a darkie with an ax in his hand."

After watching Edna and Mr. Fuller, Peters shifted his eyes towards Jacob standing outside the barn. He had suspected Jacob of running for quite a while. "That boy's fittin' to run, I tell you, fittin' to run," Peters told Fuller a couple of months ago as the plantation owner sat at his desk making entries in his ledger. "He's got that look in his eyes, had it for quite some time. Fittin' to run, I say." Peters paused, then continued, "With all due respect, Mr. Fuller, you're too easy on your slaves. Give them too many liberties." When Mr. Fuller did not look up nor respond, Peters turned on his heels and left, even more determined to keep a sharp eye on Jacob. Peters was proud of his reputation of never having a runaway escape from any farm he worked on as overseer and he wasn't about to let that snout-nosed Jacob ruin his reputation.

Jacob, in his few short years, had seen so much brutality at the hands of his former owner. The slaves on the Wilson farm were severely beaten by the overseer, or even Mistress Wilson, for the slightest infraction. Miss Sophie had a finger cut off because she stole a biscuit. Amos had to wear a bell collar around his neck for an entire year because he had run away. Little David was beaten bloody because he spilled milk on the way from the barn. Matilda was locked in the dark cellar for days because she failed to make a dress to the satisfaction of the Mistress. Massa Wilson treated his slaves like his livestock, sometimes working them until they dropped while he reaped the benefits of slave labor. Jacob pulled back his sleeve and rubbed his cold fingers across the scars on his forearm that represented Massa Wilson's rage. Bondage was unbearable for Jacob.

He had heard about the Underground Railroad. Jacob knew he could get some help if he ran. He remembered snatches of stories he had heard of slaves who made it to the North and that there were abolitionists to help them get their freedom. He knew in his heart that slavery was wrong, regardless of what the law said. With or without Lincoln's promise, Jacob would run.

Christmas on most plantations was the time slaves got new clothes, new shoes and extra meat and other food to enjoy. Masters, who were more generous,

also gave gifts to each slave. So the excitement prevailed throughout the season. The Fuller plantation was no exception, but with the close of 1862 at hand, there was a somber undertone to the celebratory mood of the slaves. Outwardly, they were joyous, but deep down inside, they were anxious. They all but held their breath, waiting for the new year, having heard that President Lincoln would sign the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. This year, the holiday season was joyous, yet filled with hopeful anticipation, a time of waiting and watching to see if President Lincoln would keep his promise.



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