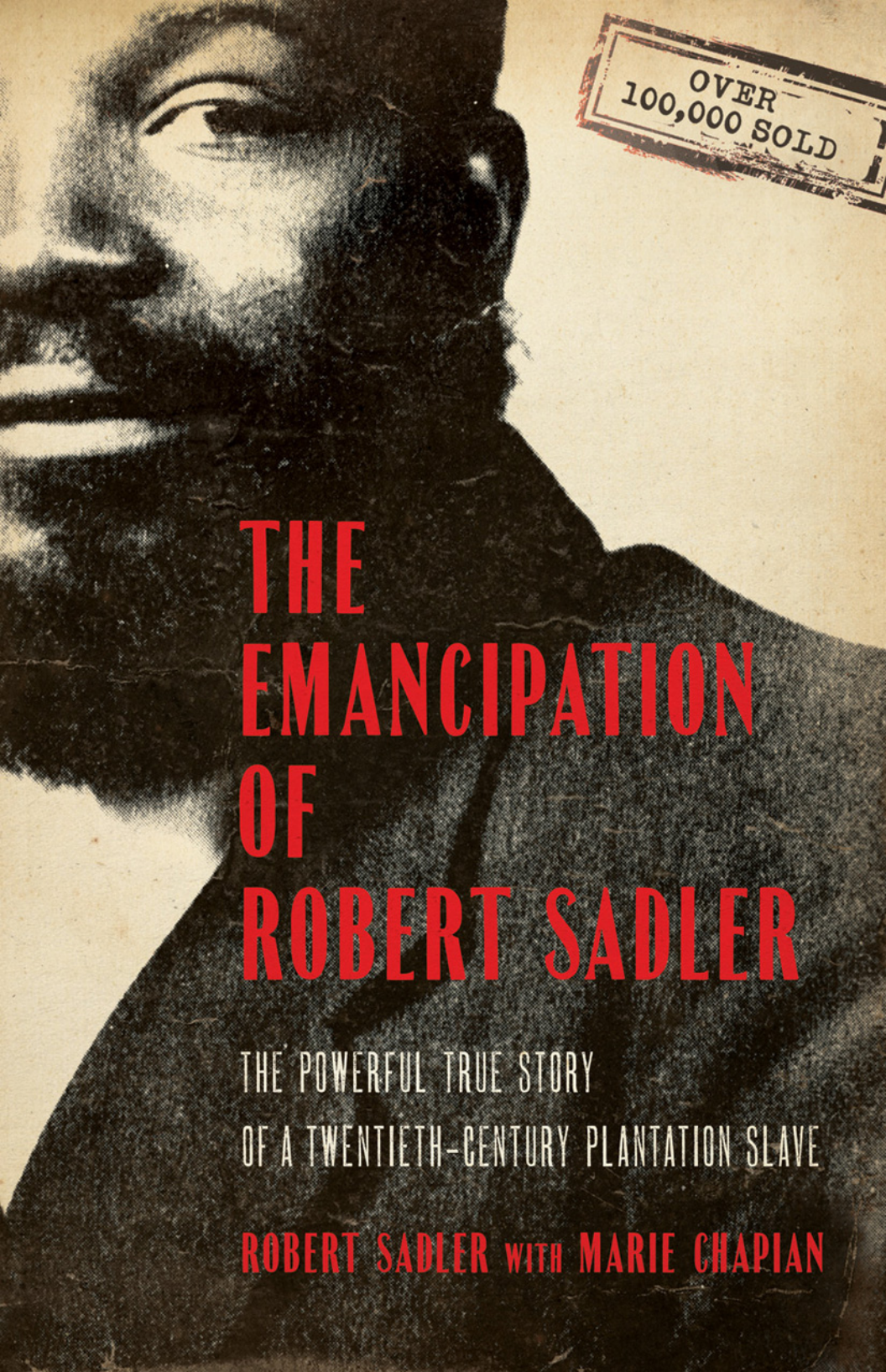

THE EMANCIPATION OF ROBERT SADLER

THE POWERFUL TRUE STORY
OF A TWENTIETH-CENTURY PLANTATION SLAVE

ROBERT SADLER WITH MARIE CHAPIAN

1

I had a big ache inside me as I walked down the street toward the mission and saw the men still asleep in corners and doorways. It was hot and still and flies buzzed around their faces. Soon they would be lined up against the walls of the buildings—stinking, sweating, worn, and broken, looking for a bottle, a fix, money for something to eat. I thanked the Lord that I wasn't lying there with them. I could have been, you know.

We were gathering that morning for our Sunday service. I watched the little congregation file into the small mission, one by one. Young children sat quietly on folding chairs, dressed in their Sunday best, holding Bibles and paper fans. We greeted one another with smiles and hugs and then sat waiting for the service to begin. There was a feeling of excitement in all of us—not that this was any special meeting, but we always expected the Lord to touch and bless us when we met together, and He never let us down.

I went to my place at the portable organ in the front of the room. As I looked out at their faces, there was a rush of gladness and love in my heart for each of them. As we began to praise the Lord together, tears rolled down some of their cheeks. In spite of the heat they were comfortable with God, who had saved them and given them hope and new lives.

Sister Patterson, God bless her, lifted her face as she sang in her soft voice. This large, strong woman shook with emotion. She had

grown up in Anderson, right near this mission. Since she was old enough to talk, she had worked in white people's homes. Now she also helped out in the mission, besides raising her five children.

The name of the mission is Compassion House. It is located on Church Street in Anderson, South Carolina. I was born in Anderson. It was also in Anderson that I was sold into slavery. Yes, slavery.

But I was telling you about Compassion House. When I first opened its doors in 1970, I asked the Lord to help me to live up to that name. Often it wasn't easy. When you're dealing with drunks, alcoholics, prostitutes, pimps, and drug addicts, you get used to being conned, propositioned, and robbed.

There was a pink curtain separating the front meeting room and the back room where I cooked and slept. In the back room now was a young man with one lung and sclerosis, sleeping off a drunk. He told me he wouldn't take another drink as long as he lived if I'd let him stay with me, but he had promised me the same thing a dozen times. We could hear him coughing while we sang. I went back to the cot, where he lay crumpled up in a ball.

"You in bad pain, son?"

"Naw. I'm jes fine."

"Mebbe we oughter get you to a hospital."

"I ain't goin to no hospital!"

"All right, if that's what you want—"

"If I die, man, I ain't dyin in no hospital ward. Uh uh! I'm dying with a bottle of whiskey in one hand and a woman in the other, and God help what's in between!"

"You don't have to die, Evans. You can live if you want to."

The young man looked up at me. "Preacher," he said, "godda hell."

I sat on the edge of the cot and began to pray. His young, tough face was thin, worn like an old man's. His body was emaciated. When I had finished praying I noticed a photograph on the floor beside him. It must have fallen out of his pocket. I picked it up and held it in my hands.

"Who's this little child, son?"

"Hit's my daughter."

I stared at the photograph of the smiling, round-cheeked girl. I was startled for a moment. It looked just like my baby sister, Ella. Lord, it was almost sixty years ago. . . .

I could see little Ella sitting on Mama's lap. Mama was singing to her. I was curled up alongside them, and in the quiet, hot shadows of our cabin that summer afternoon, it seemed as if the whole world was singing. Lord, Mama had a way of making things like that.

"Isn't that something? You being the daddy of this fine child!"

The boy grunted.

"You know something, Evans? It look just like my own baby sister. It's her likeness sure enough." Sixty years ago . . . Lord, Lord.

Evans grunted again and cursed. I handed him the photograph. "Yusuh, a fine little child. You can be mighty proud."

"Godda hell, preacher."

The meeting was longer than usual that morning. I preached about forgiveness; what joy and power there was in it. I knew what I was talking about. After the last song had been sung and we had a time of fellowship with one another, it was early afternoon.

When the people were gone, I sat alone in the empty room with only the sound of Evans's heavy breathing coming from the cot in the back. I would have to take him to the hospital.

I went to the back room and stood beside him. "Come on, Evans, we're going to the hospital."

"I ain't goin' to no hospital!"

I said nothing. I just stood there next to him. He looked at me and then suddenly he seemed startled. He quivered a little and sat up quickly. "OK, Sadler, OK."

I got Evans to the emergency room and they admitted him at once. He was pretty well known around there. "The preacher carried me here," he told the doctor. "They ain't nothin wrong with me. Preacher got a way of making a man do jes what he don't wanna do, specially with that big old shiny light of his."

"What light are you talking about, Evans?"

Evans's eyes narrowed. "Well, when you look at me with a great

big ole shiny ball bright nuff to blind a man all around you like that, what am I supposed to do?"

"If you saw something bright and shiny, Evans, you was seein the Lord and not me." I gave his arm a squeeze. "I don't want to see you dyin for the devil. I want to see you alive. Alive and livin for God."

I walked to my car that afternoon praying God would touch Evans and keep him alive. It burdened me to see a man wasting himself when he could have a rich and fulfilling life as a child of God. I thanked the Lord for getting him to the hospital.

Back at the mission I sat quietly thinking. That photograph of Evans's daughter, who looked so much like my little sister, stuck with me. So many thoughts twirled in my head, I didn't know how to sort them out. I wanted to remember little Ella's voice, hear her laugh. I tried to think back as far as I could remember—think on things I had long ago buried and let stay buried. There were things I had never told anyone. Things I didn't want to remember. Maybe now was the time for remembering, for telling. That picture sure looked like Ella. I thought I had forgotten, but no, I hadn't.

Help me remember it, Lord, so I can tell it just the way it was.

Lord, help me remember . . .

2

A streak of sunlight shone on Ella's face and on her dusty cornrowed hair as she laughed and wriggled in Mama's lap. She was two years old that day. Mama had saved up and bought some fresh fruit from the white folks' fruit stand about a mile down the road, a pear and a peach for everybody. We had eaten the fruit happily and eagerly for breakfast with the whole family. There were eleven of us children, though all were not living at home then, and I was the tenth.

We laughed as Mama tickled Ella's toes and kissed us both. Her white teeth shone as she laughed and sang to us. She was the warmth and brightness of our lives.

Our birthday fun together soon ended when Father's large figure appeared in the doorway. He was over six feet tall and his eyes always had a little bit of rage in them. Whenever he appeared, we children had a way of disappearing. We were never sure what kind of mood he'd be in. This day he was in a bad mood and Ella and I scurried outside. We could hear him in the cabin cursing and yelling at Mama. We knew there'd be no more singing that night and Ella's birthday would not be mentioned again.

Our small three-room shanty was on a large plantation south of Anderson, South Carolina, about a quarter of a mile off the road. Our cabin was built of pine board and leaned slightly to one side. Its wooden window frames had no screens or glass, and

inside there were no ceiling or floor coverings. During the day we could see the chickens running underneath the house and at night we could see the stars through the boards of the roof. We had a barn of unpainted wood for our mule and buggy, a chicken coop, and a pigpen for the pig, when we had one.

Mama cooked over the fireplace at one end of the kitchen. There was a long wooden table with a bench on either side in the center of the room. The straight-backed chair Father sat in was in one corner, Mama's rocking chair was by the fireplace, and along the wall was the cupboard with wooden doors that swung open. An old wooden box and the butter churn made up the rest of our furniture. Pots and pans hung from nails on the wall. Even with two windows in the room, it was never very bright. The sun seemed to shine in for a few feet and then stop, like it had better things to do.

"I'm hongry!" my father snapped. We could hear Mama's quick movements getting his supper on a plate. There was hot corn bread baking in the ashes near the fire and fatback frying in the skillet. She rarely answered Father back, even if he was in a good mood.

Ella and I were sitting close together burying our toes in the dirt alongside the house when we heard a loud smack from inside. Then there was a tumbling, and we held our breath. Father had hit Mama and knocked her down. We crawled under the house to be outside his reach when he came out of the house. As I sat in the darkness underneath the house, I fought tears of fright and anger. Even though I was just a small child, I wanted to jump up and defend Mama.

It was not long before Father had finished eating and was fixing to leave again.

We could hear Mama pleading with him, "Please stay home, honey. Don't go out again tonight. . . ." When he went out his pay went with him. His curses rang through the air, and soon he stomped out of the cabin and was walking up the road. That night in our bed on the floor we could hear Mama's soft crying coming from the room next to ours where she slept. By morning Father still wasn't home and there was no food for the table.

The days and nights continued like that—Father ranting and Mama crying. On the rare nights he stayed home, he'd be drunk.

Two of my brothers had moved into town to find jobs, my sisters Ada and Janey were hired out, my brothers Leroy and Johnny were day workers on the plantation where we lived, and Pearl and Margie helped Mama work the land we rented and with the work at home. With everybody working, that left Ella and me to ourselves most of the time.

We usually played together in the dirt outside our cabin, or we'd play near wherever Mama was working. In the autumn when most of the family was picking cotton for the white farmer in his fields, Ella and I played at the edge of the field Mama was in. It was a happy sight to see Mama coming for us at noontime. We'd go home and she'd cook the noon meal and then return to the field until quitting time. Sometimes we'd eat lunch in the field, and always, no matter where it was, Mama bowed her head and thanked the Lord for the food. One day as we sat at the edge of a small grove of trees eating our lunch, Mama looked at me soberly and said, "Robert, some day you learn to read, hear? Then you set down and read to me from the Bible."

"Yes, Mama," I said.

It was nearly hopeless for me to learn to read. Not many of the blacks in our area ever got a chance to go to school. But the way Mama was looking at me, I knew it was important and that I should take her words seriously.

There were other workers' children playing with us while we waited in the fields for our mamas. Many of the families who sharecropped worked their own land as well as the white man's they rented from. That was one of the reasons we couldn't go to school.

In the mornings everyone in our cabin was up before daybreak. The older children got up and fed the mule. Mama fed the pig and the chickens. Then on certain days there'd be the washing done outside in the big pots in the yard. Everybody would come in for breakfast by sunup, and then they'd be leaving for the field, where they worked all day.

My sisters Pearl and Margie especially wanted to go to school. They begged and begged Mama to find a way to let them to go school. One day after they had done their morning work, Mama announced she had made arrangements for them to go to the little Negro school about two and a half miles away. My sisters were so excited they danced and jumped around the cabin until I thought we might fall through the cracks in the floor. There was much singing and laughter in the cabin that morning as they got ready.

Each sister had one dress, and after they finished their work, they'd stick their heads in the rain barrel outside and then rush inside and put on their dresses. I watched them hurry out of the house and begin the two-and-a-half-mile walk down the road to school. Mama would holler after them, "Be sure'n be home about 10:30 so's to knock down cotton stalk!"

In a few hours they'd be home, and the first thing they would do would be to wash their dresses in the basin and hang them over the chair to dry before the fire until they'd take the smoothing iron the next morning and iron them for wearing. They came home with stories of danger and adventure nearly every day.

"The big white school bus fly by so fast we almost got runned over." They'd be grey with dust, their hair and clean dresses ruined with dirt. "Mama, why they do us like that?"

"Girls, listen to me. There ain't no dirt can grieve us til they buries us. And when that day come, we rise up on the glory side—so there ain't no use to grumblin. Go wash up now."

One morning they came home crying so terribly I thought maybe the white children had beat on them. It was worse than that. They had been walking up the dusty road the two and a half miles to school when the white farmer we rented from approached Father.

"Whar those chillren of yors goin, Jim?"

"They's goin to school, jes like yors."

"Oh no they ain't, Jim. *My* chillren is goin to school, yor chillren is goin to the field!"

From the look on his face, Father knew that he'd better send

his children to the man's field. Though they worked for nothing, he knew if they didn't some mighty bad things could happen to him.

"Git out the field, chillren," he said.

The crying lasted about a week. They never went back to school again because soon they were doing Mama's work too. She didn't have much energy, and she seemed to be having trouble catching her breath. Some days she could hardly get out of bed. But she went to work in the field nearly every day.

Ella and I played in the clearing during the day with the other children too young to work the fields, waiting for our mamas to come for us. One day when we saw her coming for us, her forehead and fine high cheekbones shone with sweat. Her small but strong body stooped low and her walk was slow. As she drew near to us a broad smile spread across her face. We ran to her arms and kissed her wet face. Mama's health was getting worse. Her breathing was more labored and she looked like she was in pain. I began to feel protective of her, and I worked hard at cleaning, sweeping, and feeding the chickens. My older sisters were working with Mama in the field so it was just Ella and me in the house.

One night Leroy and Johnny moved out of the cabin to join the other brothers and get jobs. Mama said good-bye to them tearfully. As she embraced them, she looked as though she wanted to tell them something—something special, something that would make sense of everything and give it all a purpose and meaning. But instead she kissed them each quickly and said, "The Lord watch over you."

When they were gone, and the house was still, Mama sang to us. It was as though she was praying. She was part Indian and usually wore her long black hair in braids tied around her head. This night her hair hung loose and fuzzy around her shoulders, and I thought she looked like an angel. The other children must have thought so too, for we all sat real quiet, watching and listening as Mama sang to us. We joined in, too, and sang until it was time to go to bed.

Jesus, shine your light, shine shine shine . . .

As tender and loving as Mama was, Father was mean. His disposition was growing worse and worse. He came home that night drunk as usual. I heard him call for Mama. I crawled off the bed and watched from the shadows. He was teetering on his feet and in an ugly mood. Mama got out of bed and came into the kitchen where he stood. Without a word he raised his arm and struck her a blow across the head, and she was sent sprawling to the floor.

I ran across the room with a scream and grabbed a stick. I leaped at my father and beat his legs with all my might. "Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!" I screamed at him. "Don't you hit Mama!"

Before I knew it, he had me dangling from his hand in the air. Then with a howl he hurled me the length of the cabin into the wall, knocking me unconscious.

Mama fussed over me for a couple of days, and I ached and hurt everywhere. She was afraid something had been broken inside my head because of the lump and bruises.

Mama's health continued to grow worse. By cotton-picking time she was unable to rise up out of the bed. She cried often for her children. I would hear her in the bed as I brought in the wood in the morning.

"O Lord, have mercy. Have mercy. Take care of my chillren, Lord."

"Where you goin, Mama?" I would ask her.

"Son, you gonna have to be mighty strong, hear? Yor Mama's goin home soon."

"Goin home? But you *are* home, Mama."

"No, son. Mama means home in heaven. With the Lord—that's real home."

"You leavin us, Mama?"

"I believe so, son."

She had that look in her eye again—that look as though she had something very important to say. Something that would explain everything. Like why Father was so cruel, and why things were the way they were—things like that.

"Lord, have mercy," she said instead.

I was sweeping out the cabin one afternoon and it began to rain. We dreaded rain because it poured in on everything, and the cabin was like a sieve. Work in the fields went on rain or shine. Mama lay on her bed with the rain dripping down on her pillow by her head. I stood near her bed watching her. She lay wheezing in the darkness of the afternoon, and I was afraid she might have been serious about leaving us and going to her real home. The cabin had been so gloomy since she took sick that there was little joy anywhere. Even Ella, who was always happy and laughing, became grave and sullen. There was no singing anymore without Mama to sing with us, and one day followed the other like a string of cold stones. The neighbor ladies prepared hot onion and potato soup and sarsaparilla and sage tea for Mama. They laid long strands of green and brown grasses on her chest, and they prayed.

It rained for three days. Father took Janey, Pearl, and Margie to the field with him, and Ella and I stayed in the cabin with Mama until they came home at night. Ella got a fever and had to stay in bed, so I sat by myself on the step watching the rain and waiting for Mama to wake up.

At the end of the third day of rain, I heard Mama calling for Father from her bed. "Jim . . . Jim . . ." Her voice was weak. I ran to her. ". . . Your father, honey. Git your father." She was gasping like she had been running hard and couldn't catch her breath.

"Yes, Ma'am," I said and raced out of the cabin to get my father. When I found him in the barn bent over a broken wagon wheel I shouted almost hysterically, "Mama! Mama! It's Mama! She wants you! She's real sick, Father! She's callin for you!" He didn't even look up as he worked. Finally he muttered, "I can't come, boy. Gotta finish this here busted axle."

By the time Father arrived at Mama's bedside that evening, she had slipped into unconsciousness. She never spoke or opened her eyes again. In another day she was dead.

The days which followed were a daze. The funeral was held in a little church on the hill about a mile away. I saw her lying in the

box they had built, and I wanted to scream, "Mama, get up. Get up! Mama, why you lyin there like that?"

The only one of the family who wasn't at the funeral was Ella. She was still sick. A friend of Mama's sat with her during the service giving her catnip tea on a spoon. The little church was crowded with Mama's friends and some of our relatives. My older brothers were there, brothers I had hardly even seen. I stared at them, wondering what life off the farm could be like. Did they know how to read and write? There were many things I wanted to ask them, but as it was I didn't get a chance to speak with them at all because they left right after the service. I don't think they were even aware that I was their little brother. They didn't even wait for the lemonade and sugar cookies that came later.

"Yoll eat aplenty, Robert," my sister Margie told me. "It'll be a long time before we see cookies agin!" I took two cookies and some lemonade and brought them home to Ella.

"Ella, how long you gonna lay up in that bed?"

"I dunno."

"Well, Mama's daid now."

"I know it. What're you fixin to do?"

I looked at her face and was startled to see how thin it had become. She was small for her age to begin with, but now she looked so tiny and so helpless. I felt panic rise within me.

"Ella!" I shouted.

"What you shoutin on, Robert?"

"Are you gonna die, Ella? Are you gonna die?"

Ella's condition didn't get any better. Margie gave her what was left of Mama's cabbage juice tonic; she made a paste of hot clay and cabbage leaves and spread it on her, but she didn't get well. Soon she couldn't eat anything, and it was only one month after my mother died that Ella was dead, too.

All I had in the whole world was gone—Mama, the light of our life, and now my only friend, Ella.

Father worked extra jobs as a basket maker and a blacksmith, but every cent he made he spent on liquor, and there were days

when there was not a crumb of food in the house. One day Margie and I were coming back from the mill with the sack of cornmeal in the back of the buggy, and we saw an old apple core on the side of the road. I held the reins and Margie made a dive for the apple core, and we ate it right there. The rest of the way home we looked hungrily for more apple cores.

Margie and Pearl were good to me. They played with me, talked to me, put me to sleep in the bed with them, and tried to show me love. Margie brought singing back into the cabin, and at night we would sing around the fire; or else, lying in the bed, we'd sing to the moon peeking through the boards of the roof.

Father was home less and less. Whenever we did see him he would be drunk. Then one day he came home and announced that he was fixing to take himself a new wife, so that spring Father, Pearl, Margie, and I left our little cabin and moved to the north side of Anderson to live in our new mama's home. It was a little nicer than our cabin, but it, too, was unpainted and had no finished ceiling, floor coverings, window glass, or screens, and the yard was grey dirt. Standing beside the porch were two boys, younger than us. The thing that interested me the most was that both children were fat. If they were fat, then maybe we would get some good food to eat.

"Them's Rosie's chillren," Father told us. "Yor new brothers."

Our life in Rosie's shanty with her two children was not what we expected. Rosie hated us. She pulled Margie's hair, screamed at Pearl, and would hit us at any time. While she ate at the one table in the house with her own children, we had to eat our food on our laps in the corner. She said there wasn't room for us.

The hopes of getting good food or enough to eat were quickly squelched. We got only what they didn't want. Some days we would get just one bowl of grits. We were hungrier at our stepmother's house than we had been before.

One night when Rosie had cooked up some chicken backs and corn bread for a church dinner, Margie and Pearl ran into the kitchen, tossed some pieces of chicken into their aprons, and ran

out again. We ate the chicken backs behind the shed, bones and all. Rosie threw a fit and told Father that night that we were thieves. We were outside, but we could hear her screaming at Father about us.

"Lazy, thas what! Don't do no work! Now they stealin food as well. Since you brought them three no-accounts into mah house, it's been jes trouble."

We were certain that Father wouldn't listen to her lies. He knew we were good children and hard workers, and surely he would figure out that we took the food because she wasn't feeding us.

But when he called us in to him, we could see right away he had sided with Rosie. One by one he whupped us with the buggy trace for stealing.

It got worse. Father began staying out all night drinking. When he'd come home, he'd be so drunk that he would sleep all day. He started keeping company with other women, and Rosie took her fury out on us. She would beat us for no reason whatsoever.

"They don't mind me nohow, Jim, hear? They don't mind me nohow! They good-for-nothin no-accounts, each one of em, them two girls and that useless boy."

As he listened to Rosie's lying accusations, Father began to form a plan in his mind. It was plowing time. One terrible day he came into the room where my sisters and I slept together and woke us up, ordering us to get into the wagon outside. We quickly scrambled out of bed into the cool morning air and climbed into the wagon, never dreaming what was in store for us. In fact, we thought it was a special treat to be receiving any attention from Father. Maybe we were going to town to pick up seed; maybe we were going to the blacksmith's where Father worked. We were so glad to be getting away from Rosie and her two boys that we didn't really care where we were going.

Little was said during our ride down the Abbeville Road, through Anderson and on south. The morning air was cool and damp, and my sisters and I huddled together in the corner of the wagon, bouncing against the rough boards as we rolled across the deep ruts and holes in the road. Wherever Father was going, he was mighty

intent on it. His face was grim and his back stiff and straight, like he maybe needed to belch.

Soon we passed the cabin where all of us had been born. I held my breath as I looked at the old deserted shanty. Margie and Pearl looked as though they might cry, but they held their chins stiff. The door of the shanty was open, and inside it was dark and empty. How I longed to jump from the wagon and run down the path into Mama's arms. If only Ella's little round face would appear from around the side of the sloping porch, and I could run to her and squeal and laugh again and then sit at Mama's knee and hear her sing to us. As we passed over the top of the hill, I began to cry. Pearl pinched my arm in case Father would turn and give me a lick for crying.

We bumped along the road without a word for more than an hour. Finally Pearl said to Father, "Where we goin?" He sat almost motionless on the small seat at the front of the wagon. He did not so much as whisk a hair at her question. His silence meant don't ask questions.

We grew hungry as the morning wore on, and a little sore from the bumpy ride. Still, we said nothing as we watched the South Carolina countryside slowly pass by us, the heat rising up from the earth like hot fingers. Finally, we left the main road and turned into a long driveway. On top of a hill was a large, beautiful house, the biggest I had ever seen. I wondered why Father was turning in here. It wasn't the home of anybody we knew, and obviously it belonged to a white man. We saw several shanties near the back of the property like our cabin. Father halted the mule, got out of the wagon, and started for the back door.

"Why we stoppin here? Who lives in that big house?" I asked. Margie and Pearl didn't answer, for those same questions were in their minds.

The dogs in the yard barked as Father made his way to the back door. He took off his large brimmed hat and held it in his hand. He looked tall and shabby standing there on the step; his black hair and the dark skin of his face shone in the early morning sun. Soon

the door was opened by a white man as tall as Father. They talked for a while and then Father turned and pointed to us. He turned several times, pointing to us, and then he and the white man went inside the house. When they came out, Father ordered us to get out of the wagon. Margie and Pearl jumped down first and then helped me down. We stood in our bare feet on the cold ground staring at the white man, Mr. Tom Billings, a cotton farmer.

"Y'say the boy is only five years old?" the man asked.

"Yessuh. Five years old, suh," my father answered.

"Hmmm . . . I don't like em so young."

"Take em all or take none," my father said.

The man narrowed his eyes, then said, "OK, I'll take em."

"Git over there by the house and stand still!" he ordered us roughly. We did as we were told and when we turned around, Father was in the wagon and spiraling it back the way we had come. I called out to him, but he didn't turn his head. Then Pearl called, "Father, wait! Don't leave us!" and she ran after the wagon. It was no use. Father didn't even look at her. His fierce gaze was on the road ahead of him, and he didn't pay any mind to our cries and pleas.

The wagon disappeared down the driveway and onto the main road. Pearl and Margie and I stood trembling against the side of the house, our feet digging into the cold earth. It was spring of 1917 and my sisters and I had just been sold as slaves.

3

Margie and Pearl held onto my hands so tight it hurt. When I looked up at them, they were both crying. The white man stood in front of us, looking at us with cold, hard eyes. Then, without a word, he disappeared into the kitchen. In a moment a large black woman hurried out of the door and bustled over to where we were cowering against the side of the house. She reached for our hands and said in a soft voice, "You chillren come along." Hesitantly, we followed her. The sun was shining hot overhead, and I could hear the sound of birds twittering in the trees.

"My name is Sarah, what's yours?" the soft-spoken woman asked. Margie told her our names, and in the clamoring heat, I began to shiver and tremble. Pearl put her arms around me and held me against her knees.

"You'll help me with the washing," Sarah told my sisters. "And what's this?" she said, looking at me. "How old is this here child?"

"Five years, Ma'am," Margie answered.

"Can't he talk?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Margie said.

"Well?" She looked at me, waiting, like I was supposed to say something. I couldn't get my mouth to open. She bent down and put her face next to mine. "Chile, can you sweep with a broom?" I nodded dumbly.

"Yes, Ma'am, he can sweep, sure enough," Margie said. Sarah

straightened, handed me a broom, and explained that the porch had to be swept and kept clean every day. Then she took my sisters with her inside the house. Margie squeezed my hand. "We'll be back, Robert, hear?"

I watched them leave me, and then standing alone on the large wooden porch, I began to cry. I was afraid I'd get a whupping for not doing what I was told, but I was too scared to move. When I turned around, a blond-haired young lady dressed in a pink and white dress was standing in the doorway. I stared at her, frightened, and she stared back at me, amused.

"Who are you?" she asked.

I tried to answer, but no words came out.

"Well, I hope you can work better'n you can talk," she said with a little giggle as she brushed past me and out the door.

I watched her through my tears and saw her climb into a buggy drawn by a fine brown horse that a black man was driving. Where was my father? Why did he leave us here?

After what seemed like hours, Margie and Pearl came through the porch following Sarah. They carried large bundles of laundry in their arms. I cried out in relief when I saw them, but when Margie saw that I hadn't swept yet, she snapped, "Get busy, hear? Sweep this porch!" They followed Sarah out into the backyard, and I could see them as they pounded the clothes with the paddle on the three-legged battling bench.

Margie's sharp words had their effect on me, and I held onto the crooked handle of the big straw broom like it was a person. I began sweeping, pushing the broom back and forth like Mama taught me. I could hear her soft voice, "Ain't nobody knows the corners of a house like a old broom," and she'd laugh.

"Do that mean the broom be smarter 'n people, Mama?"

"Law, child. I spect so!" and she'd laugh again. I hurriedly swept the porch so I could join my sisters in the yard. The washing would take most of the morning and early afternoon to finish. The dirt had to be paddled out of the clothes and then they were boiled in soapy water in the big black iron pots. I'd get to

stir the clothes with a big stick. Then they had to be wrenched three times and finally hung up on the clotheslines to dry. Back home Mama hung our clothes on the brush outside our cabin to dry so I got used to the smell of chokecherry and dogwood against my skin.

Later I saw the blond-haired young lady again, and I stared at her with wonder. I had never seen a sight like her before. Sarah saw me and pulled me around facing the other direction.

"What you starin at, boy?"

"Nothunma'am."

"Keep it that-a-way, hear?"

"Yezmam."

The day continued and so did my confusion. That night, huddled between my sisters on the floor of Sarah's cabin, we all cried ourselves to sleep.

The days wore on. I cried a lot and kept waiting for Father to come for us. It was cotton planting time, and almost all of the slaves were working in the fields. Margie and Pearl were taking care of the slaves' young children as well as helping Sarah in the Big House. I was given jobs such as sweeping, carrying trash, feeding chickens, chasing cows, and kitchen work.

I discovered who the lady in the pink and white dress was. She was Miss Billie, Tom Billings's fifteen-year-old daughter. She took a liking to my sister Pearl, who was thirteen. She had Pearl comb her hair and tend to her wardrobe and personal needs. If it weren't for her, Margie and Pearl would have been sent to the fields to work, and I'd have been all alone in the Big House.

One day Pearl was heating irons on the stove to iron Miss Billie's dresses, and I was standing nearby watching her.

"How old is Robert?" Miss Billie asked Pearl. "He was five June last, Ma'am."

Miss Billie's eyes grew wide. "He's young to be separated from his mama, isn't he?"

"His mama be dead, Ma'am."

"But he has a daddy—?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

Miss Billie stared at me and I shrank back. I had learned not to stare at white people.

"Do you like it here, boy?" she asked me.

I didn't know what to answer. If I said no, I might get a whupping. I stared back at her, speechless. Then I began to cry.

"Oh, he must miss his mama!" Miss Billie exclaimed. Pearl didn't say a word.

Miss Billie reached her hand out to me and said, "Come here, honey." She took my hand and walked me into a long, narrow pantry where she opened a big jar and gave me a chocolate cookie with pink frosting.

"Thenkyoumam," I mumbled, and took a small bite. I had never tasted anything so delicious in my whole life.

As the weeks passed, Miss Billie grew more and more distressed at my being there and often would complain to her father. "It ain't right!" she would tell him. Finally she threatened to run away if he would not take me back to my home. He told her to hush up and mind herself. Margie and Pearl were horrified at the idea of our being separated, but they said nothing.

The Billings family had few guests; but one day in early summer, some of their friends from Hartwell, Georgia, came to visit. The house slaves had been busy preparing for their arrival—scrubbing, polishing, waxing, and washing. The grounds were cleaned, mowed, and trimmed. When their horse pulled the buggy up in the driveway, a Negro man stood waiting to help them and tend to the horse. As I watched them enter the house in a flurry of chatter and excitement, I didn't realize that these jolly people would bring another tragedy into my life.

Margie, who was just fourteen, had been a hard worker both inside and outside the house. She was strong and they worked her like a mule. She worked from sunup until sundown without a complaint. She was working in the Big House while the visitors from Hartwell were staying there. Mrs. Billings, a large, stern-faced woman, boasted about her new servants to the visitors. She

called for Margie and showed them what a fine buy her husband had made when he purchased her.

"Can't read or write," she boasted. "That's how to keep em. She's a mighty strong one, too."

"And who is the little niggerboy?" the plump, jowly friend asked.

"Tell her your name, boy," Mrs. Billings ordered.

". . . Wobber."

Mrs. Billings jolted upright, enraged. "Robert *what,* boy?"

"Wobber Sadder," I mumbled.

Mrs. Billings's face went red. I had humiliated her in front of the people she was trying to impress. She called us out of the room, excusing herself to her guests. On the other side of the door, she bent down and hissed, "You say *Ma'am* when you talk to me, boy!" She grabbed me by the ear. "I ought to have you whupped to teach yoll a lesson! Now *how* do you talk to me?"

". . . Ma'am, Ma'am," I stammered.

"Didn't yor mama teach you yor manners?"

"No, Ma'am, yezmam."

She rolled her eyes. "Is this here chile ignornt, Margie?"

"Yezmam, but I'll teach him, Ma'am."

"I don't think so, girl. Now git out, both of you!"

"Yes, Miz Billings, Ma'am," Margie said, taking me by the hand.

After we had left the room, Mrs. Billings sold Margie to her lady friend. The next morning after our breakfast of molasses drizzled over corn bread in Miss Sarah's shanty, Margie was called to the Big House. Pearl and I went with her. We played a little game as we walked in the early morning light up the damp path. Walk two steps, hop one step, jump two steps, hop one step.

When we got to the clearing, we saw the buggy hitched up and the visitors climbing into it. Then Mr. Billings called Margie. "You belong to these people now, girl. Git in," he ordered, and he pointed to the back of the buggy. Margie cried out in alarm. "Lord, have mercy!"

"Git in, I said!"

We followed Margie to the edge of the buggy. Her eyes were wide with fright. She reached down to hug me.

"Take care of Pearl, Robert honey; she ain't as strong as me." Her voice was all broken up.

Pearl and I began to cry. "No! No!" Pearl screamed. "Don't take my sister! Don't take her!"

I felt a hard blow across my head and shoulders, and I fell tumbling to the ground. I looked up in time to see Mr. Billings push Pearl back as she, too, rolled to the ground.

The buggy jerked forward, and soon it was moving down the driveway. Margie's face was pale with pain. "Please, Robert . . ." I heard her call, "Please be a good boy. . . ." When she saw our sister sobbing and running after her, she cried, "Pearl! Pearl! No!" The lady in the front of the buggy turned and ordered, "Hush up now! Hush up, hear?"

"Git back to the kitchen, girl," Mr. Billings told Pearl. "Understand I cain't be feeding three more mouths, got enough to take care of as tis. And you, boy, git over here and sweep up this here yard!"

In the weeks that followed I received many slaps for crying. Master Billings often whupped me with a peach tree switch. It stung terrible. I could hardly do the tasks I was given. Something else happened to me which added to my misery. I had trouble talking and pronouncing words. I couldn't speak right, but up until the day I arrived at the Billings Plantation I was hardly aware of it. Nobody had ever made anything of it before and so it didn't bother me. Now, however, I completely lost my speech. I could not form any words at all, and when I did try to talk, it came out all garbled and nobody could understand me. I became the "backward nigger boy," and it made Mr. Billings angry just to look at me. He lost good money when he took me on with my sisters.

Billie Billings continued to beg her father for my release. It seemed to cause her particular distress to see a five-year-old boy cowering in corners and crying all the time, even though I was a slave boy and hardly worth her attention.

Pearl was working in the kitchen all the time now, where she remained all during the summer months. She worked from sunup until late at night, and I was able to be with her most of the time.

I was glad she wasn't sent to the fields. Nearly every night I'd fall asleep on the floor waiting for her. She'd carry my sleeping body home to Miss Sarah's shanty and then she'd go back to work.

Pearl was a frail girl in the first place, and now she seemed to be more thin and more worn looking. One morning when she was cleaning the kitchen after the white people's breakfast, Miss Billie came in, looked at her, and said, "Pearl, you set down a spell; you look plumb tuckered!"

"Thank you, Miss Billie, Ma'am," Pearl answered, "but ah's fine, jes fine."

Master Billings happened to overhear Miss Billie's words, and he burst into the kitchen and yelled at Pearl. "You get busy, you hear? Don't you pay no mind to settin!" He ordered Miss Billie to her room, and we could hear their voices in hot argument as Pearl trembled and worked and I helped her in the kitchen. We were scared, because when Miss Billie fought with her father about us it made him so angry we feared he'd whup us in revenge.

I hated him so much I was afraid my heart might stop beating. I wanted desperately to tell Pearl how much I hated him, but I couldn't form the words in my mouth. It was as though I had a clump of weeds growing on my tongue and there was no room for words to get out. *Hate. Hate. I hate! I hate! I hate!* If only I could say it.

Pearl rarely sang to me or held me anymore. It seemed I was more often in her way than anything else. "Robert, bring this inside," "Robert, sweep the porch," or "Robert, wash this"—never "Robert, honey, come here and let me love you," like she used to.

One hot afternoon when she was preparing the food for the white folks' dinner, she told me to bring a bowl of fresh fruit to the dining room table. I picked it up and it was heavy. "Don't drop it, hear?" she snapped at me. The minute she said the words, my hands slipped and the bowl of fruit fell to the floor. Glass shattered and the fruit rolled in all directions. Pearl flew at me and hit me hard upside the head. I was so stunned and hurt, I wailed helplessly. Then I ran out of the kitchen and across the yard and hid behind

the smokehouse. I heard Miss Sarah calling me. "Robert, Robert! Where are you, boy?" I held my breath. I heard her mutter, "Poor chile is dumb, can't talk. They done beat the sense out of him."

Pearl didn't get back to the shanty until almost dawn. I had been waiting all night for her. She lay down on the floor beside me, and without a word turned to face the wall. Her body shook badly and I reached out for her. "Peh, Peh—" I called, pulling her arm. She did not turn around to me, and I could hear her softly crying until she finally fell asleep.

I could not understand Pearl's coldness toward me. It hurt and confused me. A few days later Miss Sarah took me to her knee and said, "Honey, don't you fret yourself over Sister, hear? She be wanting you to grow up now so's you can learn how to take care of yorself. She be afraid you gonna stay a baby, an if she be sent away, what'd happen to you?"

Pearl's rejection of me just made me cling to her all the more. I held her skirts while she worked; I cried and whined beside her all day long. Miss Billie would often find us together in this way. Pearl would be trying to do her work, and I would be clinging to her skirts and whimpering. If Pearl would wash Miss Billie's hair or help her with her bath, I'd be nearby, sniffling.

Then one morning early in September, after we had been living at the Billings Plantation for about five months, Pearl and I were summoned to get into the buggy which was hitched up in the driveway. This time Pearl swooped me up in her arms and held on to me for dear life.

"I won't let them take you away from me, chile, I won't!" she cried. "They have to kill me fust!" She held me with all her strength. Her thin young face was fierce.

Master Billings strode out of the house and climbed into the driver's seat. "Git in!" he ordered. "Both of ye!" We did as he commanded, and Pearl never let her grip loosen on me. It was as though she were hanging on to life itself.

We bumped along the driveway, then turned on Abbeville Road toward Anderson. I looked back at the Billings Plantation and saw

my last glimpse of Miss Sarah as she came running to the driveway to watch us leave.

Pearl held me tight and kept her gaze fixed on the back of Master Billings's head. Hatred filled her eyes like I had never seen before. As we bumped along the dirt road, I wondered where we were going. The hope that things could get better had long ago left me.

The hours went by and we found ourselves pulling up in front of Father and Stepmother's shanty north of Anderson. I could hardly believe my eyes. Even Pearl seemed a little excited. Her eyes were big and her mouth parted, but her grip on me tightened.

"Git out," Master Billings ordered. We climbed out of the buggy over the wheel caked with dried mud and ran toward the house. Father came to the door and looked with stunned surprise at his two children returning home. He grabbed us by the arms and took us back to the buggy. Before he could ask why we were being returned, Master Billings shouted, "Keep em, hear?"

It was then we learned that Miss Billie had threatened to commit suicide unless he returned us to our home. Master Billings, although furious about it, returned us to our father.

Hungry and exhausted, our bodies aching from the long, bumpy ride on the floor of the buggy, we entered the familiar cabin. Rosie actually seemed glad to see us. She held out her arms to us and hugged us. When we told her how Margie had been sold and taken off to Georgia she cried real tears. We ate ravenously of corn bread, molasses, greens, and salt pork. Then Rosie put us to bed on the straw pallet on the floor.

I heard her say in a trembling voice to Father, "They look half dead, Jim, half dead shor 'nuff."