



A S L O W J O U R N E Y

WE TIED THE CANOE TO THE RAFT WITH A ROPE AND FLOATED SLOWLY, very slowly, on the quiet river. If we heard anyone following us, we planned to jump into the canoe and row for the shore. We were in such a hurry to leave the island that we had not put any supplies into the canoe. This was not a good plan, but we didn't have the time to think of a good plan.

When the men came to the island to search for Jim, I knew that they would find the campfire which I built. They would probably watch it all night, expect Jim to return to it. Since we could hear no one following us, I was fairly certain that the campfire had fooled them.

In the early morning, as it was beginning to get light, we traveled to the Illinois shore and tied the raft to a tree on a sandbar, which is a long, raised area of sand extending into the river. The sandbar was covered with tall trees growing close together and was a good place to hide the raft and canoe. We used our ax to get branches from the trees to cover the raft.

At this place in the river, there were mountains on the Missouri side and nothing but trees on the Illinois side, so we felt fairly safe here. We

stayed hidden in the bushes all day and watched the rafts and boats travel down the river and the huge boats, powered by steam, travel up the river. I told Jim the complete story of my conversation with Mrs. Judith Loftus the night before.

Jim said that she was a very intelligent woman, and if she had gone to search for him, she would have brought a dog with her to help find him. She would not have sat by a fire all night waiting.

Toward evening we saw no boats on the river. All was quiet. Jim took some of the boards that were part of the floor of the raft and built a kind of tent with them in the middle of the raft. This tent would protect us when it rained and would be a good place to store our supplies. We put a layer of dirt five or six inches deep within a frame in the middle of the tent. We would be able to build a fire there on cold, rainy days.

The second night we traveled for seven or eight hours, with a current that was moving fairly fast. We fished and talked and then went swimming whenever we felt sleepy. We were filled with wonder and a new respect for nature as we floated down the big, quiet river. We lay on our backs, looking up at the stars and talking quietly. We didn't laugh often, and then, only a quiet kind of laugh. We had very nice weather and no problems that first night or the next or the one after that.

Each night we traveled past towns. Some of them were on top of high black hills. We could see no houses, just lights. The fifth night, we passed the large city of St. Louis, and the whole world seemed suddenly one big light. In my small town, people would say that 20,000 or 30,000 people lived in St. Louis, but I never believed them until I saw that wonderful spread of lights at two o'clock on that quiet morning. There wasn't a sound; everyone was asleep.

Each night I would go ashore and buy a small amount of food. Sometimes I would take a chicken or some vegetables from a farmer's garden. Pap always called this "borrowing" and said that this should not be called "stealing" if you planned to return the chicken or vegetables at some later time. The Widow Douglas said that this was just plain stealing and could not be called anything else, and that no well-mannered person would ever steal. Jim said that Pap was partly correct

and that the Widow was partly correct, and that the best plan was to promise not to “borrow” certain vegetables or fruit, but that there would be no harm in continuing to borrow the others. So, we promised ourselves that we would not borrow any of the fruit that wasn’t ripe at this time of year. We both felt better immediately.

Our tenth night on the river, we had a big storm after midnight, with much thunder and lightning. The rain poured down heavily. We stayed inside our tent, and no one guided the raft. In the bright light of a flash of lightning, we suddenly saw a large boat crashed on some rocks. We were floating straight toward the boat. The flashes of lightning allowed me to see quite clearly now. The boat was leaning over, with much of it under the water.

I was excited at the thought of exploring this mysterious boat, but Jim said, “No!” He was certain that a man would be on the boat to protect the supplies it carried.

“What’s there to protect? Most of the boat is under water. Who would remain on a boat in that condition in a storm like this? At any moment, the boat might break apart and disappear.”

Jim couldn’t answer that argument and didn’t try. I continued, “We might find some good supplies that we could use. Boat captains are rich and always travel with the best supplies.”

Jim wasn’t happy, but he finally agreed to go with me on the boat. A flash of lightning showed the boat directly in front of us, and we tied the raft to a part of the boat extending above the water.

We found it difficult to walk on the deck of the boat because it was leaning greatly. We moved very, very slowly, feeling our way with our feet. It was so dark that we could see nothing. Soon we reached the door of the captain’s cabin, which was open. We looked around and far off we could see a light and hear some voices. Jim whispered that he was feeling sick and that we must return to the raft immediately. I agreed and was slowly backing away from the door, when I heard a voice say, “Please, don’t. I promise not to tell anyone.”

“You’re telling a lie, Jim Turner. You’ve done this before. You always want more than your share, and you always got what you

demanded because you threatened to tell. But this time, you'll not threaten us again."

By this time, Jim had returned to the raft, but I was curious about what was happening in the boat. I said to myself, "Tom Sawyer would stay and listen to what these men have to say, and I'll stay, too."

I got down on my hands and knees and moved slowly toward the room with the light. I could see a man lying on the floor with his hands and legs tied with ropes. Two men were standing over him; one was holding a gun pointed at his head.

The man on the floor was saying, "Please don't shoot, Bill. I'll never tell anyone."

The second man said, "You never spoke truer words. I won't give you the opportunity to tell anyone. If we hadn't surprised you and managed to tie a rope around your arms and legs, you would've killed us both. You won't threaten us again, Jim Turner. Put away that gun, Bill."

"Let me shoot him, Jake. He killed Hatfield and showed him no mercy. He deserves to be killed."

"Thank you, Jake," said the man on the floor. "I'll be grateful as long as I live."

Jake didn't answer him but motioned to Bill to follow him out of the room. I tried to back away quickly in the dark, but the deck slanted upward so greatly that I could barely move. I hid on a bed in a nearby room, seconds before the two men entered. They talked seriously and quietly.

Bill said, "I know he'll tell the police. I want him dead."

"So do I," said Jake quietly.

"Why don't we shoot him, then?"

"Listen to me. Shooting him could cause us problems. If we were ever caught, we would be hanged for murder. We can take whatever of value we find on this boat and hide out on the shore to wait. In a few hours, this boat will sink completely and Jim Turner will **drown**. No one will be able to blame us for his murder."

"What happens if the boat doesn't sink?"

"We can wait the two hours, can't we?" And they left the room.

I hurried as quickly and quietly as I could to where we had tied the raft. “Quick, Jim, we have to hurry. We must find the boat that brought the men here and untie it. Then all three of them will be left here. Get on the raft and begin the search.”

“Raft? What raft? I can’t find our raft. The rope must have become untied, and the raft floated away.”