

Uncle Tom's Cabin, by Harriet Beecher Stowe

The following excerpt tells the story of Eliza. Her husband has already crossed the Ohio River and escaped to freedom in the north. Eliza, who has stayed behind in Kentucky, has finally decided that she too must cross the Ohio River in early spring and run for freedom. Why has Eliza made this decision? She has just discovered that her master Mr. Shelby has sold her young son Harry to a man named Mister Haley. In Chapter Seven, "The Mother's Struggle," Eliza leaves the cabin of Uncle Tom, a devoutly Christian slave who has tried to comfort her, and heads for the Ohio River with young Harry in her arms. She knows that Mr. Haley and two slaves named Sam and Andy are less than an hour behind her and her son on their desperate race north.

In consequence of all the various delays, it was about three-quarters of an hour after Eliza had laid her child to sleep in the village tavern that Mr. Haley along with the two slaves Sam and Andy came riding into the same place. Eliza was standing by the window, looking out in another direction, when Sam's quick eye caught a glimpse of her. Haley and Andy were two yards behind. At this crisis, Sam contrived to have his hat blown off, and uttered a loud and characteristic ejaculation, which startled her at once; she drew suddenly back; the whole train swept by the window, round to the front door.

A thousand lives seemed to be concentrated in that one moment to Eliza. Her room opened by a side door to the river. She caught her child, and sprang down the steps towards it. The trader caught a full glimpse of her just as she was disappearing down the bank; and throwing himself from his horse, and calling loudly on Sam and Andy, he was after her like a hound after a deer. In that dizzy moment her feet to her scarce seemed to touch the ground, and a moment brought her to the water's edge. Right on behind they came; and, nerved with strength such as God gives only to the desperate, with one wild cry and flying leap, she vaulted sheer over the turbid current by the shore, on to the raft of ice beyond. It was a desperate leap -- impossible to anything but madness and despair; and Haley, Sam, and Andy, instinctively cried out, and lifted up their hands, as she did it.

The huge green fragment of ice on which she alighted pitched and creaked as her weight came on it, but she stayed there not a moment. With wild cries and desperate energy, she leaped to another and still another cake; stumbling -- leaping -- slipping -- springing upwards again! Her shoes are gone -- her stockings cut from her feet -- while blood marked every step; but she saw nothing, felt nothing, till dimly, as in a dream, she saw the Ohio side, and a man helping her up the bank.

"You're a brave gal, now, whoever ye are!" said the man, with an oath.

Eliza recognized the voice and face for a man who owned a farm not far from her old home.

"O, Mr. Symmes! – Save me – do save me – do hide me!" said Eliza.

"Why, what's this?" said the man. "Why, if it isn't Shelby's gal!"

"My child! This boy! -- He sold him! There is his master," said she, pointing to the Kentucky shore. "O, Mr. Symmes, you've got a little boy!"

"So I have," said the man, as he roughly, but kindly, drew her up the steep bank. "Besides, you're a right brave gal. I like grit, wherever I see it." When they had gained the top of the bank, the man paused.

"I'd be glad to do something for ye," said he; "but then there's nowhere I could take ye. The best I can do is to tell ye to go there," said he, pointing to a large white house that stood by itself, off the main street of the village. "Go there; they're kind folks. There's no kind o' danger but they'll help you, – they're up to all that sort o' thing."

"The Lord bless you!" said Eliza, earnestly.

"No occasion, no occasion in the world," said the man. "What I've done is of no account."

"And, oh, surely, sir, you won't tell any one!"

"Go to thunder, gal! What do you take a feller for? Of course not," said the man. "Come, now, go along like a likely, sensible gal, as you are. You've earned your liberty, and you shall have it!"

The woman folded her child to her bosom, and walked firmly and swiftly away.