

MASTER SLAVE

An Epic Journey from
Slavery to Freedom



HUSBAND

ILYON
WOO

WIFE



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MASTER SLAVE HUSBAND WIFE

*An Epic Journey
from Slavery
to Freedom*

ILYON WOO

SIMON & SCHUSTER
New York London Sydney Toronto New Delhi

The Crafts' Journey to Freedom

Free state
 Slave state
 Train
 Steamboat
 Stagecoach



To Joon and to Kian, Oan, and Nari

OVERTURE

REVOLUTIONS OF 1848



In 1848 William and Ellen Craft, an enslaved couple in Georgia, embarked upon a five-thousand-mile journey of mutual self-emancipation across the world. Theirs is a love story that begins in a time of revolution—a revolution unfinished in the American War for Independence, a revolution that endures.

This story opens in that year of global democratic revolt, when, in wave upon wave—Sicily, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, and all across Europe—the people rose up against tyranny, monarchy, the powers that be. News of these uprisings ricocheted, carried across the seas by high-speed clipper ships, overland by rail, and in defiance of time and space by the marvelous Electro-Magnetic Telegraph. From New York down to New Orleans, Americans raised torches in celebration, sure that these revolutions rhymed with their own.

Americans watched Europe, while the ground shifted beneath their own feet.

In 1848 the war with Mexico was over, and the United States laid claim to five hundred thousand square miles of new territory. More than six states would emerge from this gigantic stretch of land, including California, where the discovery of gold would bring a rush of “forty-niners” the next year. The spirit of Manifest Destiny ran high: that will “to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government.”

But cracks were forming along with this movement. A global pandemic, the cholera, was traveling fast. New immigrants joined the nation from Ireland, Germany, China, and other distant lands, challenging ideas of what an American could be. The two-party political system was breaking down, as voters became polarized over the engine that powered all that national growth: slavery. Politicians came to blows over the future of slavery in the territories, the rights of slavers, the question of who would inhabit the

nation's expanded lands. Meanwhile, those who could not claim the rights of American citizenship demanded the rights denied them.

In July 1848, at the historic first Woman's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York, signers of a "Declaration of Sentiments" proclaimed, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men *and women* are created equal." A leader among them was Frederick Douglass, who connected the revolutions in Europe to America's, and denounced the gulf between American aspirations and realities. As he would declare a few years later, one memorable July Fourth: "There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour."

Still, Douglass held out hope. Change was coming: "The arm of commerce has borne away the gates of the strong city. Intelligence is penetrating the darkest corners of the globe. It makes its pathway over and under the sea, as well as on the earth. Wind, steam, and lightning are its chartered agents. Oceans no longer divide, but link nations together. From Boston to London is now a holiday excursion.

"Space," he said, "is comparatively annihilated."

Across space and time, in Macon, Georgia, William and Ellen Craft would also find inspiration in the American Declaration of Independence, whose words they knew, even as they were forbidden to read them—words that were read aloud in celebration every year on the very courthouse steps where William had once been sold.

This line caught their attention: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that from these, are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." So, too, did this biblical verse, spoken by the apostle Paul: "God made of one blood all nations of men" (Acts 17:26). And in these words, William and Ellen Craft found fodder for a revolution of their own.

On their revolutionary travels, they did not swim, run, or hide, navigating by starlight. No Underground Railroad assisted them out of the South. Rather, they moved in full view of the world, harnessing the latest technologies of their day: steamboats, stagecoaches, and, above all, an actual

railroad, riding tracks laid by the enslaved, empowered by their disguise as master and slave, by the reality of their love as husband and wife.

They would ride these same technologies to become celebrities on the lecture circuit and then defy a merciless new Fugitive Slave Act that helped draw the nation toward Civil War. In their own time, the Crafts were hailed as emblems of a new American Revolution. One of the most famed orators of their day prophesied that “future historians and poets would tell this story as one of the most thrilling tales in the nation’s annals, and millions would read it with admiration.” Theirs is a story that now, more than ever, requires retelling and remembering.

The story they lived is not neatly told. It offers no easy dividing lines between North and South, Black and White—no single person or place to blame. It is a story that holds the entire United States accountable and resists the closure of a happily ever after.

The Crafts passed through Washington, DC, at a time when enslaved men, women, and children were marched in shackles past the Capitol; when US congressmen looked out onto the streets to see them, and some wished to avert their eyes. They lived in Boston at a time when not only Southern slavers but also Americans across the country would have sent them back into bondage.

But they also lived in a time when people stood together with them—men and women of many colors, thousands strong in Boston’s Faneuil Hall, who put aside political and other differences, if only for a moment. And when Frederick Douglass thundered, “Will you protect, rescue, save these people from being re-enslaved?” the thousands roared, “Yes!” in resounding affirmation, determined to do what was right, even if it meant sacrifice.

This book tells the story of the Crafts’ revolt during the combusive years of 1848 to 1852, when the trajectories of the couple and the nation collide most dramatically. Though propelled by narrative, this work is not fictionalized. Every description, quotation, and line of dialogue comes from historic sources, beginning with the Crafts’ own 1860 account, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*. The story is also informed by historical materials beyond the scope of the Crafts’ presentation, all detailed at the end of this book.

These sources make it possible to tend to questions such as: Why did the Crafts escape when they did? What inspired them? Who were their enslavers? What were the sleights of hand behind the magic they pulled off? Behind these questions, larger ones loom. Why is such an epic American story not better known? Or: What is it about this unforgettable story that makes it so difficult for us, as a nation, to remember?

Here is a picture of a couple and a nation in motion: a moving panorama, to reference a medium of the age. At heart, this is an American love story—not in the fairy-tale sense, but an enduring relationship between a man and a woman, a couple and a country. It begins in the earliest hours of a late-December morning.

MACON

Day 1, Morning: *Wednesday, December 20, 1848*

THE COTTAGE



It is predawn in Macon, Georgia, and at four o'clock, the city does not move. The air is windless, chill, barely stirring the high, dark pines. Cotton Avenue is quiet, too, the giant weighing scales suspended, for the moment, behind closed warehouse doors. But the Ocmulgee River flows along the eastern shore, and so too, an enslaved couple moves, ready to transform, in a cabin in the shadow of a tall, white mansion.

They have scarcely slept these past few nights, as they rehearsed the moves they now perform. Ellen removes her gown, forgoing a corset, for once, though she needs to reshape her body in other ways, flatten or bind the swell of her breasts. She pulls on a white shirt, with a long vest and loose coat, slim-legged pants, and handsome cloak to cover it all. She does up the buttons, breathing in the late-December cold. Christmas is coming soon.

She dresses by candlelight, which flickers through the cottage, “her” workshop, locked with a key, the least of which she’ll lose if she is caught. All around are the tools of her trade—workbaskets stocked with needles and thread, pins, scissors, cloth. Her husband’s handiwork is in evidence as well: wood furniture, including a chest of drawers, now unlocked.

Ellen slips her feet into gentleman’s boots, thick soled and solid. Though she has practiced, they must feel strange, an inch of leaden weight pulling each sole to the ground, an extra inch she needs. Ellen may have inherited her father’s pale complexion, but not his height. Even for a woman, she is small.

William towers beside her, casting long shadows as he moves. They must do something with her hair, which he has just cut—gather it up, pack it. To leave it behind would be to leave a clue for whoever eventually storms down the door.

There are the final touches: a silky black cravat, also the bandages. Ellen wears one around her chin, another around her hand, which she props in a sling. She has more protection for her face, green-tinted glasses and an extra-tall silk hat—a “double-story” hat, William calls it, befitting how high it rises,

and the fiction it covers. These additions hide her smoothness, her fear, her scars.

Ellen stands, now, at the center of the floor, transformed. To all appearances, she is a sick, rich, White young man—"a most respectable-looking gentleman," in her husband's words. He is ready too, in his usual pants and shirt, with only one new item, a white, secondhand beaver hat, nicer than anything he has worn before, the marker of a rich man's slave.

To think it had been a matter of days. Four days since they had first agreed to the idea, first called it possible. Four days of stuffing clothing into locked compartments, sewing, shopping, mapping the way. Four days, they would claim, to prepare for the run of a lifetime. Or, a lifetime of preparation, narrowed down to this.

William blows out the light.

They kneel and pray in the sudden dark.

They stand and wait, breath held.

Is that someone listening, watching outside? Just beyond their door is the back of the Collins house, where Master and Mistress should be asleep in bed.

The young couple, holding hands, step to the front of the cottage, as gently as they can. William unlocks the door, pushes it open, peers out. There is just the circle of trees, a whispering of leaves. Such stillness: he thinks of death. Nevertheless, he gives the sign to go.

Spooked, Ellen bursts into tears. They had borne witness to people torn by bloodhounds, beaten and branded, burned alive. They had seen the hunts, the frenzy around a slave chase. All this, they know, might be in store for them. They draw back in, holding each other one more time.

Each will have to begin the journey alone, on a separate path through Macon. William will take the shortest route available and hide aboard the train. It would be a danger for them both if he was recognized. The dangers may be even greater, though, for Ellen, who must travel a longer road. It would be bad enough for her to be caught trying to escape at all. How much worse for Master Collins to awake to learn that his wife's favored lady's maid dared to be a gentleman like him. Collins was a person of careful method, who believed that a punishment should fit a crime, and be instructive. What kind of instruction he would provide in such a case could only be imagined. William's thought: double vengeance.

As for the mistress, if she had ever interceded on behalf of her favorite slave—also her half sister—it is unlikely she would do so here, not if Ellen were found dressed in a man’s pants, possibly from the master’s own cloth. Ellen might have been spared at previous sales, but not this time. At the very least, she and William would be separated for good, likely after being made to witness one another’s pain—if, that is, they remained alive.

Now silent, Ellen centers herself in prayer, in the faith that she will move by as she battles for mastery over every inch of the one thousand miles to come: faith in a power greater than any earthly Master, such as she will pretend to be. Stilled, she owns the moment.

“Come, William,” she speaks.

Once more, the door opens. The two step out, their footfalls soft, like light on water. William turns the lock, pockets the key, a drop of metallic weight. They creep across the yard, to the street, near the house of the sleeping slavers. With a touch of hands, they part. When they next meet—or so they hope—they will take their places as master and slave, escaping to reunite as husband and wife.