



On a chilly November afternoon in 1850, Kentucky slave owner Arthur Shelby and Mississippi slave trader Daniel Haley were sitting in Shelby's well-furnished dining room. With their chairs almost touching, they earnestly discussed business.

Haley was short and heavyset. He had coarse features and the swaggering air of a low-class man who is trying to elbow his way upward in the world. He wore a gaudy vest of many colors and a blue neckerchief with yellow dots. Rings bedecked his large, coarse hands. His heavy gold watch-chain had a bundle of large seals of many colors attached to it. During the conversation Haley flourished and jingled this bundle with evident satisfaction.

Shelby had a gentleman's appearance. His well-maintained house and high-quality furnishings indicated wealth. "That's the way I'd arrange the matter," Shelby said.

“I can’t do business that way, Mr. Shelby. I can’t,” Haley said.

“Tom is an uncommon fellow. He’s certainly worth that amount. He’s sensible, capable, and honest. He manages my whole farm like clock-work.”

“You mean he’s honest as niggers* go,” Haley said, helping himself to a glass of brandy.

“No. Tom is a good, steady, pious fellow. I trust him with everything I have—money, house, horses—and let him come and go around the country. He’s honest and trustworthy in everything.”

“Some people don’t believe there’s such a thing as a trustworthy nigger,” Haley said, “but *I* do. In the last bunch I took to New Orleans there was a fellow who was gentle and quiet and who prayed a lot. He fetched me a good sum. I bought him cheaply from a man who had to sell out, so I made six hundred dollars on him. I consider religion a valuable thing in a nigger when it’s genuine.”

“Well, Tom’s genuinely religious,” Shelby said. “Last fall I let him go to Cincinnati alone to do business for me. I said, ‘Tom, I trust you because you’re a Christian. I know you wouldn’t cheat me.’ Sure enough, he came back and brought five hundred dollars. Some low fellows

*In the 1850s uneducated people (both white and black) often used the term *nigger* instead of *Negro*.

asked him, 'Why didn't you head to Canada?' Tom answered, 'Master trusted me.' A slave who heard the conversation told me that Tom said that. I'm sorry to part with Tom. You should consider him as covering everything that I owe you, and you *would* if you had any conscience."

"I've got about as much conscience as any businessman can afford—just enough to swear by," Haley joked. "I like to oblige friends, but I'm a little hard up this year." He sighed and poured some more brandy.

"Well then, what do you want, Haley?" Shelby asked after an uneasy silence.

"Do you have a boy or gal you can throw in with Tom?"

"None that I could easily spare. I wouldn't sell at all if I didn't have to. I don't like parting with any of my slaves."

The door opened, and a small quadroon* boy around four years old entered the room. He was beautiful and engaging. His black hair hung in silky curls around his round, dimpled face. His large dark eyes, full of intelligence, looked out from under thick, long lashes. He wore a robe of scarlet and yellow plaid, carefully made and neatly fitted. His manner combined confidence and shyness.

"Hello!" Shelby said. He whistled and tossed

* *Quadroon* refers to someone with no "pure" black parent but at least one parent with some recent black ancestry.

a bunch of raisins toward the boy. "Pick them up!" The child scampered after the prize while Shelby laughed. "Come here," Shelby said. The child came up, and Shelby patted his curly head and chucked him under the chin. "Now show this gentleman how you can dance and sing." The boy sang in a rich, clear voice and, in time with the music, made comical movements with his hands, feet, and body.

"Bravo!" Haley said, throwing him a quarter of an orange.

"Now walk like old Uncle Vincent when he has rheumatism," Shelby said.

The child's flexible limbs instantly assumed the appearance of deformity. With his back humped and Shelby's cane in his hand, he hobbled around the room. His face was drawn into a sorrowful pucker. He pretended to spit right and left, in imitation of an old man.

Shelby and Haley laughed uproariously. "Now," Shelby said, "show us how Elder Robbins leads the reciting of psalms."

The boy drew his chubby face down to a formidable length and began nasally intoning a psalm with great gravity.

"Hurray! What a young one!" Haley said. "That kid's a case." Clapping his hand on Shelby's shoulder, he said, "I'll tell you what: throw in that kid, and I'll consider your debt paid."

The door was gently opened, and a quadroon woman around twenty-five years old entered the room. The boy resembled her so much that she clearly was his mother. She had the same large dark eyes with long lashes and the same ripples of silky black hair. She blushed as she saw Haley eye her in undisguised admiration. Her dress, of the neatest possible fit, showed her fine figure. Haley immediately noticed her delicate hands and slender ankles. She stopped and looked hesitantly at Shelby.

“Well, Eliza?” Shelby said.

“I was looking for Harry, sir.” The boy bounded toward her, showing the spoils he had gathered in the skirt of his robe.

“Take him away, then,” Shelby said. Eliza hastily withdrew, carrying Harry on her arm.

“By God,” Haley said, “there’s an article! You could make your fortune in New Orleans on that gal any day. I’ve seen people pay more than a thousand for gals not a bit handsomer.”

“I don’t want to make my fortune on her,” Shelby said dryly. Desiring to redirect the conversation, he uncorked a bottle of wine and asked Haley’s opinion of it.

“First-rate,” Haley said. Slapping his hand on Shelby’s shoulder, he said, “How much do you want for the gal? What’ll you take for her?”

“She’s not for sale,” Shelby said. “My wife wouldn’t part with her for her weight in gold.”

“Oh, women always say such things because they have no head for numbers. Just show them how much jewelry someone’s weight in gold will buy, and they’ll see things differently.”

“I said no, and I mean no,” Shelby said.

“Well, you’ll let me have the boy, won’t you? I’ll pay handsomely for him.”

“What on earth do you want with the child?” Shelby asked.

“I have a friend who wants handsome boys to raise for the market. He’ll sell them to be servants to the wealthy. It makes a place look good to have handsome boys open doors and wait on visitors. They fetch a good sum. This little devil is so comical and musical, he’s just the article!”

“I’d rather not sell him,” Shelby said thoughtfully. “I’m a humane man. I’d hate to take the boy from his mother.”

“You would, would you? Well, I can understand how you wouldn’t want to hear a woman screeching the way they can. What if you send the gal away for a day and I take the boy then, when she isn’t around? To make up with your wife, you could get her some earrings, or a new gown, or some such thing.”

“No,” Shelby said.

“Come now. These niggers aren’t like white folks. They get over things. I’m not hard like some slave dealers. I’ve seen some fellows who can pull a woman’s child right out of her arms

and sell the child while she's screeching. That's bad policy. It damages the mother. Sometimes it makes her unfit for service. I knew a handsome gal in New Orleans who was ruined by that sort of handling. The fellow who bought her didn't want her baby. She squeezed her child in her arms and carried on in an awful way. When they carried off the child, the mother went mad. A clear waste of a thousand dollars. Poor management. It's always best to do the humane thing." Haley leaned back in his chair and folded his arms with an air of virtue. "Ted Loker, my old partner, would crack gals over the head and knock them around when they started hollering. I told him that just ruins the gals. It makes them sickly and sometimes ugly. It also makes it harder to break them in. Humaneness pays better. Still, I don't see anything wrong with selling a young one while the mother's away. White women are brought up to expect to keep their children, but niggers that are raised right know not to expect such things."

"Then, mine haven't been raised right," Shelby said.

"I guess not. You Kentucky folks spoil your niggers. You mean well by them, but you aren't doing them any favors. Niggers get sold to God knows who, so you're not doing them any favors if you give them notions and expectations instead of preparing them for what's to come. I bet your

niggers would fall apart in some places where a Louisiana or Mississippi nigger would be singing and dancing for joy. So, what do you say?”

“I’ll think it over and discuss the matter with my wife.”

“Alright, but I’m in a hurry. I want to know as soon as possible.” Haley rose and put on his overcoat.

“Come back this evening between six and seven, and you’ll have my answer,” Shelby said. Haley bowed and left. Shelby thought, “I would have liked to kick him down the steps, but I owe the rascal money, so what’s to be done?”

The needs of the helpless carry little weight against financial interests, especially when the helpless are regarded as things: property.



In approaching the door, Eliza had overheard enough of the conversation to know that a slave trader was making offers to buy someone. She would have stopped at the door to listen after coming out, but her mistress had summoned her. Still, Eliza thought she had heard the trader make an offer for Harry. Her heart had pounded. She had pressed Harry so tightly against her that he had looked up into her face with concern.

“Eliza, girl, what ails you today?” Margaret Shelby asked when Eliza had upset the water pitcher, overturned a small table, and offered her mistress a nightgown instead of the silk dress she had told Eliza to bring from the wardrobe.

“Oh, Mistress!” Eliza cried, bursting into tears. She sat down in a chair and sobbed.

“Why, Eliza, what ails you, child?”

“A trader has been talking with Master in the parlor. I heard him,” Eliza said.

“Well, silly child, so what?”

“Do you suppose Master would sell my Harry?”

Knowing nothing of her husband’s debts, Margaret responded, “Sell him? No, you foolish girl! He wouldn’t sell any of our slaves. Why would anyone want to buy Harry? Cheer up, and hook my dress. Braid and curl my hair the way you did the other day. And don’t listen at doors anymore.”

“You never would agree to Harry’s being sold?” Eliza asked.

“Of course not. I’d as soon sell my own child. Really, Eliza, you’re getting too proud of Harry. A trader can’t visit without your thinking he wants to buy him.”

Reassured, Eliza nimbly completed her mistress’s dressing and grooming.

Margaret was a high-class, religious woman. Although her husband wasn’t religious, he respected his wife’s piety. What he dreaded most, after his conversation with Haley, was telling his wife.