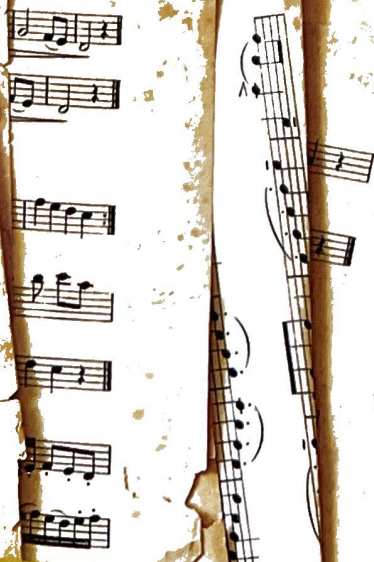




CONTENTS

Introduction		1
Chapter 1	“Never a Slave!”	2
Chapter 2	John Brown’s Body	18
Chapter 3	We Are All in This War	31
Chapter 4	Getting into Paradise	45
Chapter 5	Root, Hog, or Die	66
Chapter 6	Songs for the Right	76
Chapter 7	Sing Up the Walls	91
Chapter 8	Breaking the Chains	108
Chapter 9	The Good We Might Do	121
Afterword		131
Time Line		135
Further Reading		136
Image Credits		137
Acknowledgments		138
Index		139



Chapter 1

“NEVER A SLAVE!”

“My baby,” Sarah told her mistress simply, “will never be a slave!”

— a quote from Sarah Hannah Sheppard, Ella’s mother

Ella was only a scrap of a girl, far too young to be a spy. But that’s what her mistress was asking her to be. Ella traced the rose pattern in the parlor carpet with her bare toe as Mistress Phereby’s voice rose and fell.

“Your ma is a house slave, and there’s no knowing what a house slave might do,” said Mistress Phereby, and she reeled off a list of imaginary sins: “Your ma could throw away a piece of china to keep me from finding out that she broke it, or she could steal a silver spoon. Why, she could hide an egg in her sleeve and then cook it up for your dinner. If she does anything like that, you be sure to tell me, Ella.”

She put a finger under the child’s chin. “And here’s the most important thing. Are you listening to me?” Ella nodded. She was having trouble following what her mistress was saying, but she understood perfectly well that she was just a slave, and she had to do as she was told.

“There’s been talk. All kinds of talk. Why, just one county over, an ungrateful slave poisoned her mistress’s food. If you hear your ma or any of the other slaves plotting against me, you be sure to tell me. Mind, now, this is to be our secret.”

Ella knew she wasn’t expected to reply.

“Because you are a good girl, you may look at this for a moment.” Mistress Phereby handed Ella a kaleidoscope that was standing on an elegant table.

The Atlantic Slave Trade



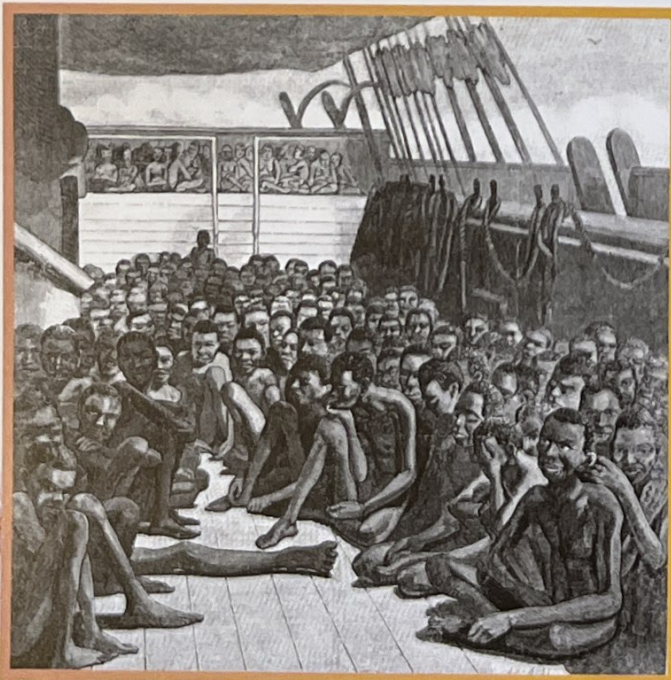
Ella peered into the kaleidoscope, enchanted by the swirling patterns of brilliant blue and purple and red that formed as she turned it. She wanted to turn it once more, but Mistress Phereby snatched it out of her hands.

“That’s enough for now,” she said briskly. “When you have something to tell me, you may look through it again. And remember, what I’ve said is a secret!”

The Journey into Slavery

How did Africans become slaves? They were captured by rival tribes or African slave dealers, sold to European traders, and forced onto ships for a nightmarish voyage called the Middle Passage. "The place allotted for the sick Negroes is under the half deck, where they lie on the bare planks. By this means, those who are emaciated, frequently have their skin, and even their flesh, entirely rubbed off, by the motion of the ship..." wrote Alexander Falconbridge, a British surgeon who made four voyages on slave ships, in his book, *An Account of the Slave Trade in West Africa*. Many died during the voyage. Others were thrown alive into the sea because they were too weak to fetch a good price at auction.

The voyage from Africa to America was called the Middle Passage because it was the middle of a trade route that was more or less a triangle. On the first side of the triangle, boats carried textiles, guns, and brandy from Europe to Africa. These were exchanged for Africans captured and thrown into slavery, and this human cargo crossed the Atlantic to the Americas—the second side of the triangle—where the slaves were exchanged for sugar, tobacco, and cotton. The same ships then sailed the third leg of the triangle back to Europe. Almost everyone in the Western world had some connection to the slave trade, by producing raw materials, manufacturing the goods, or simply buying the products.



Captive Africans on the deck of the slave ship *Wildfire*.



Work in the cotton fields of the Deep South was back-breaking.

Nobody knows the actual numbers, but it is estimated that between the years 1500 and 1870 more than eleven million Africans were ripped from their homes, marched in shackles onto ships, and forced to live as slaves in a strange, hostile new world in South America, the Caribbean, and North America. Most of them lived in miserable conditions, forced to do back-breaking work and punished severely for the smallest offense.

After 1776, when the United States became an independent country, the “peculiar institution,” as slavery was called, began to die out in the northern states. The businesses there did not require large numbers of laborers. But in the South, where cheap labor was needed to work the vast plantations of sugar, tobacco, rice, and cotton, slavery flourished.



The Hermitage, the plantation near Nashville where Ella Sheppard was born a slave. This print is from 1856, around the time that Ella's father was able to buy her.

Ella Sheppard and her mother, Sarah, were slaves at the Hermitage, a fine plantation that had been built by Andrew Jackson, who became the seventh president of the United States. It was a vast, prosperous place just outside Nashville, Tennessee, with a stately mansion, fields of cotton plants, and cabins where 150 slaves lived.

Ella's history was tangled up with that of the people who owned her. Her great-grandmother Rosa had been the daughter of a Cherokee chief. Rosa had fallen in love with the son of another chief—an African chief—who was a slave owned by Andrew Jackson's relatives, the Donelsons. Though Rosa had been born free, she loved her African chief so much that she

was willing to live as a slave too. That is, except when the owners made Rosa angry. When she got mad enough, she'd stomp home to her tribe. Before leaving, she'd always threaten to lay a curse on the Donelsons if they harmed any of her fourteen children while she was gone. Sarah—Rosa's granddaughter and Ella's mother—was still owned by the Donelson family.

Ella's grandfather on her father's side was not a slave but a slave owner. He was a white planter named James Glover Sheppard. Slave women had no protection from their masters. If a slave-holder wanted to take one of his slaves to his bed, little could stop him. Many children on the plantations could say that their father was also their owner. One of James Sheppard's slaves had his baby, a bright, charming boy named Simon. James Sheppard also had a son, Benjamin, by his wife. Simon grew up as the slave of his own half-brother as well as his father.

When Benjamin Sheppard grew up and married Phereby Donelson, they both brought all their slaves, including Sarah and Simon, to the Hermitage. Simon became a livery man, working with the horses and carriages, and Sarah was a house slave.

Sarah and Simon fell in love. Benjamin Sheppard was fond of his half-brother, so he did something unusual for the time: he let Simon marry seventeen-year-old Sarah. Marriages among slaves weren't recognized as legal, and just about everybody, including his wife, Phereby, told Benjamin that he was being silly, but Benjamin thought that letting his slaves go through an imitation wedding ceremony was a harmless way to keep them happy.

On February 4, 1851, when Simon and Sarah's baby girl was born, the parents were allowed to name their own child. That was unusual too; slave owners had the right to name their slaves whatever they wanted. Sarah called the baby Samuella,