Harriet Tubman

By Ann Petry

CHAPTER ONE:

Chesapeake Bay forms the western boundary of the section of Maryland which is sometimes called Tidewater Maryland, sometimes called the Eastern Shore. Here there are so many coves and creeks, rivers and small streams, that the land areas are little more than heads or necks of land, almost surrounded by water.

In these streams the ebb and flow of the tide is visible for miles inland-hence the name Tidewater Maryland.

In 1820, much of the Eastern Shore was heavily wooded. The streams were filled with fish. Game birds -- wild duck and snipe -- abounded in all of the coves and marshes. It could truly be said that every plantation thereabout "at its garden gate, has an oyster-bed, a fishing-bar, and a ducking blind."

The plantation that belonged to Edward Brodas, in Dorchester County, was typical of this section of Maryland, for one of its land boundaries was a river-the Big Buckwater River. It was more or less isolated. The nearest village, Bucktown, was little more than a settlement composed of post office, church, crossroads store, and eight or ten dwelling houses.

There was an air of leisure about the planter's life here. Fishing and hunting were an integral part of it, just as it had been part of the life of the Indians, who had practically disappeared from the Eastern Shore by 1750.

The house in which Edward Brodas lived was very large. There had to be room for his friends, his relatives, as well as his family. Visitors came from long distances, and so usually stayed a month or two before undertaking the journey back home. There were extra rooms for travelers, who carried the proper letters of introduction, because inns and taverns offered uncertain lodging for the night.

Edward Brodas was known as the Master to his Negro slaves. His house, which the slaves called the Big House, stood near a country road. The kitchen was a small detached building in the rear, known as the cookhouse. Not too far away from the Big House were the stables, where the riding horses and the carriage horses, the grooms and the hostlers were housed.

Close to the stables were the kitchen gardens and the cutting gardens. Beyond these lay the orchards and the barns for the work horses and cows and mules.

The Big House, the cookhouse, the stables, formed a complete unit. Beyond this lay the fields, the clear cultivated land bordered by the forest.

Out of sight of the Big House, but not quite out of hearing, was the "quarter" where the slaves lived.

The quarter consisted of a group of one-room, windowless cabins. They were built of logs that had been cut from the nearby forests. The chinks were filled with mud. These roughhewn logs were filled with sap, and as they dried out, the wood contracting and expanding with changes in temperature, the

roofs sagged, the walls buckled. The narrow clay-daubed chimneys leaned as though some unseen pressure were forcing them over. Seen from a distance, these sway-backed cabins seemed to huddle together as though for protection. The fact that they were exactly alike, that they were surrounded by the same barren hard-packed earth, furthered the illusion.

The cabins were exactly alike inside, too. There was a crude fireplace with one or two black iron pots standing in front of it. The hearth was merely a continuation of the dirt floor. When the wind blew hard, smoke came down the chimney, into the room, in puffs, so that the walls were smoke-darkened. Even in summer there was a characteristic smoky smell in the cabins.

The fireplace not only provided heat in winter, it was the source of light, and it was used for cooking. Piles of old worn-out blankets served as beds. There were no chairs; so the occupants of the cabins either squatted in front of the fire or sat on the floor. In the middle of the dirt floor there was a large, fairly deep hole covered over with loose boards. This was the potato hole, where sweet potatoes were stored in winter to protect them from the frost.

Harriet Greene, who was usually called Old Rit, and her husband, Benjamin Ross, both slaves, lived in one of these windowless cabins, in the quarter, on the Brodas plantation. They had several children, some of whom still lived with them. The older children were "hired out" by the master, Edward Brodas, to farmers who needed slave labor but who could not afford to buy slaves.

In 1820,Old Rit had another baby. There was no record made of the date of the birth of this child, because neither Old Rit nor her husband, Ben, could read or write.

Like most people who live close to the land, and who have neither clock nor calendar, they measured time by the sun, dividing it roughly into sunup, sunhigh, sundown. The year was not divided by months but by the seasons. It was separated into Seedtime, Cotton Blossomtime, Harvest, Christmas. One year was distinguished from another by its happenings, its big, memorable occurrences-the year of the big storm, the year of the early frost, or the long drought, the year the old master died, the year the young master was born.

Old Rit and Ben decided that they would call this new baby Araminta, a name that would be ultimately shortened to Minta or Minty. This would be her basket name or pet name, and would be used until she grew older. Then they would call her Harriet. That year would be separated from the others by referring to it as "the year Minty was born.

News, good or bad, traveled swiftly through the quarter. All the slaves knew that Old Rit had another baby. That night they left their own cabins, moving like shadows, pausing now and then to linen, always expecting to hear the sound of hoof beats, loud and furious, along the road, a sound...