

Across the  
*Wide River*



## Chapter 1

THE BOY SPUNTED ALONG the forest's edge in the bright Kentucky sunshine. As he plowed through scarlet maple leaves, they crackled under his shoes and clung to his white knee stockings. The sweet, dusty smell wrinkled his freckled nose. The sleeves of the boy's loose white shirt fluttered as he ran, and he kept one thumb firmly tucked under the waist of his gray breeches.

"Hurry up, Father!" Lowry yelled over his shoulder. Why were adults always slow as molasses? "Sherwood will think we ain't coming for Bible school!"

"Lowry Rankin!" Father sounded far away. "You know better than that."

"Honest, Father, I ain't kiddin'!" He hopped the creek that meandered along a green rise to the distant ridgeline. Suddenly something rolled under his foot and he sat down hard. Rubbing his hip as he retrieved his straw hat, Lowry rustled through the leaves until he uncovered a moldy wooden handle about two feet long. He fingered one gnawed end as Father towered above him with a stern face.

"Son, you're almost nine years old—old enough to know better than that. How many times have I told you that educated people do not say 'ain't'?" Father shifted the Bible he carried to his other hand and pulled Lowry to his feet.

"I ain't sure," Lowry admitted. He hitched up his breeches and tightened the laces at his back. "What's this, Father?"

Lowry heard his father sigh. "Please don't say 'ain't,' Lowry. Try to remember next time."

"Yes, sir. What is this?"

Father's high forehead wrinkled and his eyebrows drew together. "It looks like the stock of a whip."

"For a horse?"

"No, son." Father hesitated so long that Lowry thought he had forgotten what to say. "For slaves. This is hickory. See how thick it is, Lowry. The lash of the whip was fastened here." Father indicated the gnawed end. "It looks as if rats have been at the cowhide. The lash would have been about twelve feet long and as thick as my wrist in the middle."

Lowry crinkled his nose in distaste. "But Father, nobody around here would ever whip a slave. Are you sure that's what it is?"

Father's mouth drooped and his eyes were troubled. "Yes, son. I am absolutely certain. Whippings happen all the time. As a matter of fact, your mother and I have been talking it over, and we have decided—"

"I'll race you, Lowry!" A tremendous shove spread-eagled Lowry into the leaves again.

"—to move to Ohio, where we—"

"Sherwood!" Lowry sputtered, scrambling to his feet. He forgot all about Father, whose words were lost on the wind. Digging in his toes, he ran until the blood pounded in his ears. Maybe today he would beat Sherwood to the log schoolhouse!

Sherwood shot an alarmed glance over his shoulder. Lowry was hot on his heels. Lowry's stomach somersaulted with excitement as he gained on his friend . . . drew even . . . and . . .

Sherwood leapt the stake and rider fence and tripped in a tangle of long arms and legs on the other side. Lowry sprinted through the gate and smacked the schoolhouse door first.

"I win! I win!" His mouth stretched into a smile so wide it made his jaw ache. He threw out his chest and strutted on the porch. He did not see Sherwood wink at Father.

Lowry gathered his breath and pulled the latchstring. The batten door swung open on its wooden hinges. Lowry's shoes

clattered on the puncheon floor and he marched triumphantly into the schoolhouse. Father smiled at Sherwood and took the piece of paper the boy was holding out to him—a Bible school pass that his master had signed to say he could listen to Bible teaching if two white people were present. Lowry hung his hat on a peg and blinked while his eyes adjusted from the bright glare of the morning sun to the dim light filtering through the greased-paper window.

“I don’t think anyone else is coming, Father. May we start?” The sooner Bible school was over, Lowry reasoned, the sooner he could play with Sherwood. Sherwood nearly always had more chores to do than Lowry did; he guessed it was because his friend was older. Saturdays after Bible school was the only time they could play.

Sherwood sat down next to Lowry on the slab bench, and the boys’ shoulders heaved as they grinned at each other. The older boy’s lively green eyes and quick smile lit up the room. A sheen of perspiration glistened on his golden skin and a few droplets clung to the tight reddish-brown curls that hung over his eyes. Lowry wiped sweat from his own forehead; there was no need for a fire in the open fireplace today. Father perched on the edge of the schoolmaster’s backless chair and opened his heavy Bible.

“Today is the twenty-first day of September, in the year of our Lord 1825. We shall begin with eighth John, verse twelve. ‘Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world.’”

*This text—again!* Lowry had heard it countless times. He dutifully trained his eyes on Father, whose words rose unheeded to the rafters as Lowry daydreamed.

Friday, here in school, the schoolmaster had drawn a map of Kentucky on the slate; Lowry could still pick out the dim outline on the wall behind Father. When the schoolmaster had asked Lowry to pick out Carlisle, the town where they lived, Lowry had taken the slate pencil and made a mark smack dab in the middle

of the state. Though the master had corrected the placement, Lowry was gratified to see he was not far wrong.

Lowry loved Kentucky. The gentle rolling hills and crumbly shelved ridges hid all manner of wonderful possible pets. He knew it was best to leave the wild creatures alone, but he could not bear to hear the plaintive whimpers of an orphaned baby animal. His parents knew he would not rest until he found the helpless creature and took it under his wing.

He had found a dappled fawn last spring and named it Spot. He and his little sister, Isabella, had cared for the orphan, providing for its every need. If ever a fawn lived a softer life, Lowry never heard tell of it. He did recollect that the fawn grew much faster than he did, and in a very short time, Spot became a handful. One morning, when Lowry had faithfully carried the pail of food out to the pen to feed Spot, the high-spirited fawn crow-hopped on its long, matchstick legs, flung out razor-sharp hooves, and stampeded Lowry. He had jumped out of the way faster than a jackrabbit, while Ibbey held her sides and squealed with laughter. Spot had charged out of the pen and jaunted off to freedom, but there were many other orphans to be found to take the fawn's place. Lowry was sure that nowhere else on earth was as wonderful as Carlisle, Kentucky.

Father's voice droned in the background as Lowry's thoughts wandered across the countryside. The minutes stretched slower than a dribble of molasses, but Lowry's mind flitted like the swallowtail butterflies he loved to chase.

He had learned the hard way that some animals do not make good pets. On another occasion, while he and Ibbey were gathering hickory nuts, Lowry had heard a curious grunting. He had left Ibbey for a moment to check the underbrush for helpless orphans, but instead he had found a litter of ugly wild piglets that squealed in terror when he approached. He had just about made up his mind to leave them alone when a roaring wild hog

came crashing through the trees, alerted by the distress call of its piglets. Sunlight glinted off the monster's dripping yellow tusks as it charged. Lowry had spun on his heels to run, expecting Ibby to follow, but she had stood motionless, her face white with fear.

"Run, Ibby!" Lowry had screeched. All he'd had time to do was chuck a stone at the hog's face, but it barely fazed the enraged sow. The five-hundred-pound hog, with tusks a foot and a half long, slashed at Ibby, snagging the hem of her linsey-woolsey dress and dragging her backwards over the ground like a rag doll. That was the worst moment, when Lowry knew that Ibby was seconds from death. The hog was about to savage her right before his eyes.

Her screams had pierced his heart. In that moment, he had known he had to *do* something. Clenching his teeth, he had grabbed a stout limb and sped toward his sister. Gripping the branch so hard that his hand throbbed, Lowry had run faster than ever before in his life. Catching up to the hog, he had pounded on its bristled back until the limb cracked in two. With a fierce yell, he shoved the jagged end at the hog's eyes, caught Ibby's arm, and pulled. Her dress ripped as the two of them toppled to the ground. Fortunately, the hog had dodged and retreated. In an instant, Lowry was back on his feet, waving the broken branch menacingly before hurling it at the hog with arms that felt like jelly. He had then crawled back to his sister's side and hugged her as they both sobbed.

For a week, Lowry had been a hero in Carlisle, the envy of his schoolmates. Privately, he thought that if he had to battle a wild hog to be a hero, he would just as soon let somebody else have all the honors.

Lowry had decided there was no room for a wild piglet in his menagerie. But it didn't matter anyway. Mother had recently told him that he must not bring home any more wild pets. He supposed she meant for the time being. Money was tight lately, anyhow,

and Father talked a lot with Mother about being “financially embarrassed.” But Father was always fussing about something.

Lowry shifted uncomfortably on the hard wooden bench. Why was he suddenly feeling uneasy? He cast about in his mind but could not pinpoint what troubled him. *Wait! It was something Father said just before Sherwood pushed me down in the leaves. Father and Mother had talked over*—Lowry could not be sure, but it seemed as if Father had said something about moving . . . to Ohio!

His stomach fell to his shoes. *Why in the world would Father want to leave Kentucky?* The Rankins had lived here all his life. Well, he had been born in Tennessee, but his parents had moved when he was just a baby. He knew why they had moved that time. It was to get away from slavery. Father hated slavery, just like Grandma Rankin.

When Father talked about Grandma Rankin, it was evident that he loved his mother. From the time Father was small, she had drilled into him that slaves deserved to be free. She would sooner die than force a slave to do her work without pay; she preferred to do it herself. And if a woman as busy as she was finished her work without slaves, she said, then everyone else could do the same.

She spun flax and wool and wove them on the loom into linsey-woolsey cloth to provide clothing for her large family, and the children also helped out with the daily chores. Even when Father was very young, he had swept the house, scoured the floor with sand, and spun flax and wool to help his mother. He frequently reminded Lowry that he had always preferred work to play; in fact, Lowry doubted that Father ever had played. Father’s eyes shone as he described how he kept his mother’s garden back in Tennessee—he marked straight, orderly rows, weeded (a chore Lowry hated), and tenderly cared for the green seedlings. He had also dressed out the corn and cotton crops, repaired gates, and

even fashioned plows in his father's smithy. As he grew up, he had stitched leather harnesses and even cobbled his own wedding shoes. When Lowry thought about Father's boyhood, he felt lazy.

Father had graduated from Washington College in Tennessee, where Lowry's Great-grandpa Doak was the president. Father had married President Doak's granddaughter. That was Mother, and she had named Lowry after her father. Lowry called him Pappaw. Pappaw had convinced Great-grandpa Doak to set his slaves free. Father, raised to hate slavery, had married into another like-minded family. Father could not help but be an ab—abo—something. The word Father always used was difficult, but Lowry knew it meant "no slaves."

The trouble started when Father became a minister. Lowry knew that the church elders had scolded Father when he preached against slavery in his sermons, but he did not really understand why. He did know that Father was not the kind of man who let anyone else tell him what to do. Rather than cease to preach what he believed, he left east Tennessee one fine morning and set out for the free state of Ohio.

Pappaw had given Mother and Father a horse, a two-wheeled carriage, and seventy silver dollars for the journey. Lowry could scarcely imagine so much money! Grandpa Rankin, on the other hand, had not given anything to the travelers. He had begged Father to stay in Tennessee. Father had flatly refused, so Grandpa Rankin did not even come to breakfast on the morning baby Lowry and his parents left Dumplin Creek, Tennessee. As they drove away, though, Grandpa Rankin had rushed out to the stable and mounted his saddle horse. Silently, he'd followed the carriage on horseback while tears coursed down his cheeks.

The heartbroken procession had traveled solemnly for miles until Father finally stopped the carriage. Tenderly, he had reminded Grandpa Rankin that he was a mighty long way from home, almost too far to return safely by nightfall. What words

were spoken then, what embraces exchanged, Lowry never knew. Father could not speak of the parting without weeping. He had not seen his parents since that day.

Oh, Lowry could parrot the story of why his family had left east Tennessee, all right, but it was just a tale he had memorized. It did not concern him, except that the Rankins had not made it to Ohio, because the people of Carlisle, Kentucky needed a preacher. At first, Father had refused to settle in another slave state, but the people had insisted, and it had all worked out. The Rankins had learned to live peaceably among the slaveholders.

That thought brought Lowry back to the present. Why would his family move to Ohio now, he wondered, when they were so happy here in Kentucky? He looked up at Father, who was still reading the Bible to Sherwood and him. Father could not have held a Bible school if the slave masters in the neighborhood had not consented, so the masters could not be so bad. Some of them even allowed their slaves to attend church services and be baptized. Lowry's friend Sherwood was a slave, yet he was the happiest boy Lowry knew, always cutting a shine. Sherwood even loved his master, Mr. Roberts.

Mr. Roberts was a kind, rich man who owned a hemp farm. He never raised his voice or his hand to his slaves, and he and Father were good friends. In fact, most of the slave owners in Carlisle respected Father and attended his church, even after the church decided slaveholders could not become official members. One Sunday, a visiting minister had asked Mr. Roberts how he felt about that rule. What Mr. Roberts said had gotten back to Father, who had in turn repeated it to Lowry. "I go quite often to Mr. Rankin's church," Mr. Roberts had answered, "and enjoy his preaching, even if I cannot be a member there. I don't think there is one preacher who does not believe that some time in the future Christianity will destroy human slavery. Well, why not preach it, as Mr. Rankin does? I think he is the most consistent

Christian in the state of Kentucky. He has my profound respect, for he does not hesitate to preach and practice what he believes.” The words had made Lowry feel proud.

“What’s that mean right there, Mr. Rankin?” Lowry sat up straight. Sherwood was asking Father a question in his slow, soft drawl.

“You mean, ‘And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free,’ Sherwood?” Father repeated patiently.

“Yes, sir.”

Lowry slanted a furtive glance at Sherwood. The older boy was leaning forward and breathing in quick puffs. His eyes shone brighter than a flash of summer lightning. He plainly wanted to know the answer so much that Lowry was ashamed; he wished he had paid more attention to what Father had read.

The next instant, he wished it even more. “Lowry, suppose you explain it to Sherwood,” Father prompted. “You have heard this text many times.”

Lowry squirmed. Frantically, he wondered why Sherwood was so interested in this particular verse. He was already an honest boy, always truthful. Maybe the truth was what Father was after; maybe he knew that Lowry had not been paying attention. His face grew warm and he hung his head. “I’m sorry, Father. I wasn’t minding.”

Father sighed. “Well, Lowry, you must do better next time. We must always be ready to give an answer for the hope that is within us.” He consulted his pocket watch. “It’s powerful warm this afternoon, and past time for you to be back, Sherwood. We’ll stop now, but I will be over to visit your master later. I’ll explain it to you then.”

“Yes, sir.” Sherwood’s shoulders drooped until Lowry could almost taste his keen disappointment. For the first time, he wondered if Sherwood was as happy as he always seemed.

“You may be excused, Sherwood. I’d like to talk with Lowry privately. Just wait out on the porch. We’ll be out directly.”

“All righty, Mr. Rankin.” Sherwood lifted the latch and pushed the door wide.

Lowry shuffled to the front of the room. “I’m sorry, sir,” he began. He half-hoped his apology would forestall a scolding.

“Lowry, I—” Father bit off his words and snapped to attention. The color washed out of his face until he was whiter than a hen’s egg. “What was that?”

Then Lowry heard a scream split the air. Was Ibby in trouble again? His skin crawled. He tried to move, to run, but his knees buckled. He opened his mouth to ask Father a question, but Father was gone. Somehow, Lowry followed him out the door.

When he reached the edge of the schoolhouse clearing, Lowry relaxed. A man he did not know stood over some unfortunate animal. He guessed it must be a balky mule, for the man raised a cowhide whip, a whip as thick as Father’s wrist in the middle. The leaded tips whistled through the air and the hoarse screams stopped. Then Father sprinted pell-mell and bellowed in his Sunday voice, “Stop! Stop it at once!”

Lowry followed at a distance, curious to see what was going on. He loved all animals, not just wild orphans, and he felt sorry for the poor old mule, but he was surprised at Father’s reaction. Then he stiffened. There was no mule. What he saw was a crumpled heap of reddened tow-linen on the ground. He touched it and drew away fingers sticky with blood. Slowly his mind puzzled out the rest of the scene: the long arms and legs, the curly mop of hair, the golden skin that was now paler than a beeswax candle, except where red gashes oozed. His friend Sherwood lay curled there, still as death. Cold crept from Lowry’s fingertips throughout his body until even his lips felt numb. A great buzz filled his ears and everything went black.

Something brushed his cheek and he opened his eyes. He was stretched flat on the ground and Father was leaning over him, shaking his shoulder. Lowry saw Father’s mouth move, but he

could hear no words. Dimly he knew that something was wrong, that he must get up. Then he remembered with shock: Sherwood! He rolled groggily to his knees and struggled slowly to his feet. Father offered him a steady hand before turning to tend once again to the young slave.

As Father knelt and tenderly lifted Sherwood's limp body, giving no thought to his own white shirt, which quickly became stained with the boy's blood, a string of curse words drew Lowry's attention to the whip-wielding stranger. He had mounted his horse and was jeering from a safe distance.

"That'll learn you to truck with slaves and teach 'em to read! You ain't the only one as can teach lessons. Run him home to his master and tell him, if you dare! You can't be everywhere at once. If I catch that boy out here again, I'll finish the job!" Father's expression was bleak as the man spurred his horse and cantered away.

"Is Sherwood—" Lowry's voice cracked. Father said nothing but hurried toward Mr. Roberts' plantation. Sherwood's head lolled against Father's arm as he carried him down the path. Lowry trotted woodenly behind them. It was unbearable not to know. He burst out, "Oh, Father, is Sherwood dead?"

"No, son. He's alive, though just." Father could barely speak. "That man is right. I cannot be everywhere at once. Mr. Roberts will have to send Sherwood away."

"But, Father!" Lowry sniffled. He was crying in earnest now. "Sherwood's my friend!"

"Yes, he is your friend, so you must help me. Run and tell Mother what has happened. She'll know what to do."

"Yes, sir." He felt better for having something to do, but he hesitated. "Will I see Sherwood again?"

"No, son. He is not safe here. Don't worry about him, Lowry. God is everywhere at once, and he will take care of Sherwood. Run on now!"

Still in shock, Lowry whispered, "Good-bye, Sherwood." He stumbled blindly for home. He tried not to think, but suddenly the realization was there—this was slavery. He stopped and dragged his sleeve across his eyes. A slave might have a good, kind master and be happy like Sherwood, but it could all change in the twinkling of an eye. Even a good man like Father could not control slavery. At last, Lowry understood why Father had left Tennessee, and why he wanted to leave Kentucky now.

He ignored the stitch in his side as his feet pummeled the path. If Sherwood was as good as gone, then there was nothing left to keep Lowry here in Kentucky. He never wanted to see anyone suffer like that again. He had to get away from slavery forever. He had to get to Ohio.

## *Chapter 2*

LOWRY SHIVERED AS HE watched the ice-choked Ohio River flowing past the muddy embankment where he stood. He looked across to the village of Ripley in Brown County, Ohio, thinking about the events of the past few months and wondering what the future might hold. Tomorrow would be the first day of 1826. Colonel Pogue had invited Father to preach in Ripley on Sunday, and to stay there with him until he could build a house if Father should be called to serve the congregation. Last night, the Rankins had lodged near the ferry in Augusta, Kentucky. This morning, Mr. Courtney, the ferryman, had startled them with his timetable for crossing over to Ripley.

“I tell you, I’ve lived on the river many years and you must cross today. We’ll be perfectly safe. The skiffs will easily travel between the chunks of ice, if we hurry,” he assured Father.

Lowry saw Mother dart a wide-eyed glance at the icy river, then at her children. Ibbey sang to baby Calvin as he yawned. David watched the gray clouds spit snow, but Lowry jiggled with impatience. The sooner Kentucky and everything to do with slavery was behind them, the sooner life could get back to normal. He hoped Father would not hesitate and ruin everything.

“If we don’t go now, you won’t be able to cross for many days.” Mr. Courtney played on their hesitation like a shopkeeper losing a sale. He had the anxious look of a man who did not want to board the Rankins until April. Lowry held his breath and waited for Father’s answer.

Father turned to look at Mother. Her wide gray eyes showed her exhaustion. Worry lines creased her forehead as she jostled baby Calvin. Straggles of brown hair escaped from her bonnet

and the limp ribbons flapped in the breeze. Her cheeks were gaunt and her hands were chapped. It had taken a weary long time to settle debts and to say good-byes, and then Mother had supervised as Father packed all their belongings into one wagon and jounced uphill and down to the Ohio. It taxed her strength just to nod her head and murmur, "All right, Mr. Courtney. We shall go now."

Lowry's heart skipped a beat. At last, he would be shut of Kentucky! He tried not to think about Sherwood. Within minutes, but not fast enough for Lowry, Mr. Courtney's son filled one skiff with most of the housekeeping necessities as Mother directed. The Rankins' horse and most of their goods they left with the Courtneys to hold until spring. Courtney's son launched his craft and was halfway across the river before Lowry had gingerly settled himself in the other skiff.

"Now, ain't this fine?" Mr. Courtney observed. Lowry shot a triumphant glance at Father when he heard Mr. Courtney's grammar, but Father did not appear to notice. Instead, he doled out an alarming pile of coins and the ferryman pushed off from the shore.

The skiff raced faster than Lowry had ever traveled in his life. He wanted to shout! He squinted to keep the hard pellets of snow out of his eyes. The snow stung like fire, but the river ice mesmerized him. The floes looked like chilly stepping-stones—why, he could almost walk across them to the other side. He watched as a faraway field of ice, as wide as two tabletops but twice as thick, sailed along on the current like a wispy cloud on the wind. They were racing it, and winning! He laughed aloud and swiveled to watch Mr. Courtney as he deftly threaded the skiff between the dirty gray blocks of ice.

Lowry looked back again, and this time his heart was gripped with fear. He opened his mouth to cry out but he could not make a sound. The table of ice was rushing at the skiff and would strike

it in seconds, and only Lowry knew it. He sounded like a weak kitten as he squeaked, "Look out!"

"Hold on!" Mr. Courtney roared. With one desperate sweep of his arm, Father grabbed Lowry, Ibby, and David and yanked them to his side. Lowry's mouth smashed against Father's collarbone and he tasted salt where his teeth cut into his lower lip. He tried to draw a deep breath but Father's embrace was too tight. The skiff shuddered and creaked ominously as the ice floe rammed the hull. Then everything whirled.

The ice lodged under the skiff and spun it halfway around until it reared like a fractious colt. Lowry's scalp prickled as the whole world tilted and the household bundles tumbled slowly backward. His feet dangled toward the brown, swirling water despite Father's deathly firm grip. His breakfast was nudging at the back of his throat when he heard a tremendous splash and the boat rocked off the ice and back into the water. Lowry's entire body went limp with relief.

He watched dazedly as the ice table bucketed down the river. Gradually, the skiff stopped rocking and his breakfast settled back in his stomach. He dabbed at his bloody lip and looked at Mother, who sat with a hand to her chest as baby Calvin squalled. Father rubbed a splash of muddy water from his cheek, smoothed his hair, and cleared his throat. "Mr. Courtney!" His chin came up and his lips pressed together in a thin line.

"Yes, sir?" Mr. Courtney's words stretched mournfully. Lowry felt sorry for the man, whose face was an interesting shade of apple green.

"Thank you." Father clapped him on the shoulder. "You did well. We'll sleep in a free state this New Year's Eve." He smiled, and all the sternness melted from his countenance.

Mr. Courtney straightened his back and beamed at Father. He set his cap at a jaunty angle and rowed the Rankins to their new life across the wide river.



Spring arrived much later in Ohio than in Kentucky, Lowry noticed. Of all the disagreeable effects of the weather, he had thought ice was the worst, but a good argument could be made for mud. Mud slowed everything down, made every move sluggish and heavy. As the spring showers dragged into summer downpours, Lowry thought that Father would never finish the new house in the brief gaps between all his pastoral duties. The scarlet leaves of the sugar maples covered the ground again before the weather cleared for good. The sun beamed pleasantly the day the Rankins moved from their rented house to their new home at 224 Front Street. The plain, red-brick, two-story house was sixty feet wide and thirty feet deep.

The size of the house gave the town wags a reason to shake their heads. "Someone needs to teach Pastor Rankin to manage his money better. Why does a minister need a big, fancy house with three front doors? Who ever heard of such a thing?" The talk spread like wildfire that the new pastor was a crazy spendthrift.

Lowry was embarrassed, but Father instructed him to ignore the gossip. "A man can hardly support a family of four—no, five children, counting new baby Samuel, on my salary, but that's what I must do, and build a house, too, Lowry," he explained. "In truth, I built three houses, not one, all under the same roof. Three families need three doors," he smiled. "We will occupy the third one at the end and hope to find another family to rent the center one at fifty dollars a year. David Ammen, the editor of the *Castigator*, has already agreed to rent the other end, with his family downstairs and his Ramage printing press upstairs." Father flexed his shoulders. "Though I am tuckered out right now, I know I shall be well paid for my labor. Ammen says we may swap rent for

publishing privileges in the future. For now, his friendship will suffice, and the extra money is welcome.” When Father explained matters, everything made perfect sense.

Lowry liked Ripley, which had tucked itself into a pretty bend of the Ohio River. The houses stood in a stiff row along Front Street, like the paper doll chains that Iby cut from heavy paper. Behind the other streets, a narrow ribbon of sun-bleached grass trimmed the base of a steep, crumbly bluff that rose to brush the sky. He admired the village as he walked to school with Father one morning late in October.

As they drew abreast of a tavern, two drunken men lurched into the street. One stood squarely in Father’s path with a smirk on his face. The other splattered the ground at Lowry’s feet with tobacco juice.

“We don’t want none of your religion here. Why don’t you go back where you came from?” The man glowered at Father.

“Good morning, sir. Come to church on Sunday and I’ll answer your question,” Father replied in his precise manner.

“We ain’t coming to church, you—” The second man launched a stream of filthy language at Father, who proceeded with unruffled dignity. Lowry’s ears tingled; he shrank down in his shoes and tried to hide.

“Here, you, leave the minister alone! He’s worth two of you! Go along before I knock your heads together!” A man the size of a bear—or so it always seemed to Lowry—emerged from a nearby storefront. Mr. Patton, a deacon at the church, loomed protectively over Father and Lowry until the ruffians staggered away. “Ho, ho, ho!” he laughed after them. “You won’t see them for a month of Sundays, Pastor Rankin!”

“That is just when a pastor might do them the most good, Robert,” Father replied a trifle sadly.

The big man shook with laughter and slapped his knee. Lowry smiled as he thought of what the boys in town called Mr. Patton.

The nickname “Jolly Bob” suited him well. With a cheery wave, the deacon ducked into the feed store.

Father shook his head in disgust when they were out of earshot of the drunkards. “That’s what comes of selling whiskey almost as cheap as water. A quarter a gallon!” Father snorted. “Men, women, and even children are guzzlin’ liquor. Families starve, and some men sell their wives’ dresses off their backs to buy a jug.” Father stopped abruptly and shook his finger in Lowry’s face. “See that you never touch a drop of alcohol, Lowry.”

Lowry nodded. Father seemed as tall as a tree when he gave an order. Lowry dared not disobey him; he did not see how those drunkards could. He turned up his nose. Anyone could see that Father was a better man than those common fellows were. He always wore a spotless white stock and a neat black frock coat. His high-colored, handsome face was cleanly shaven and his dark hair neatly brushed. Why, Father was a minister! His words slashed at sin like a double-edged sword. The last thing Lowry wanted was to argue with him. Father was always right, and the people of Ripley might as well get used to it.

He picked up a smooth stone and skipped it across the surface of the Ohio River. The path to school bordered the waterway that meant everything to the town. After all, that was how the steamboats traveled, and they were still enough of a novelty in Ripley that every man, woman, and child in town turned out to watch with curiosity as the steamers passed majestically up and down the river.

Store goods came by the river, like the latest fashions from New York and Philadelphia, or sugar and molasses from the plantations down in New Orleans. The scrambling slaves in their gaily striped suits of jeans could never unload the goods fast enough to satisfy the captains. When the river froze, people had to resort to tedious overland travel, which slowed everything down. Lowry knew all he cared to about traveling on icy rivers.

Besides, even the roads were cut to follow the river's course. The Ohio River affected Ripley every minute of every day, especially the town's business.

If the Ohio rose, the town had better pay attention; a flood could mean disaster. Danger loomed when the water was low, as well. A steamboat might strike a snag and delay the delivery of precious cargo.

Ripley sent pork up the river to Pittsburgh, where it was reshipped to eastern cities, and down the river to New Orleans. Ohio farmers mostly raised hogs as their livestock, and mostly corn as their crop. They killed two birds with one stone when it came time to sell: "I let my corn walk to market!" the farmers bragged. Lowry never ceased to marvel at all the hogs that ambled through town. Drovers and dogs herded the heedless animals from all points in Ohio to two places. Cincinnati ranked first in pork packing, but Ripley shouldered in for second place. Hogs thronged the muddy streets that led to Thomas McCague's slaughterhouse.

At McCague's, they not only butchered and dressed out the hogs, but they also put rendered lard into kegs and packed pickled pork into barrels. Lowry could not stomach a visit to the wharf. There, cured hams, shoulders, and sides of bacon lay unpacked and unprotected until stevedores stacked the products every which way on the boats, like random blocks. One day, Lowry saw a dog gnawing at a slab, and he never ate pork without remembering that.

Pork was understandably not Lowry's favorite supper, but the hog trade had made Thomas McCague the wealthiest man in Ohio. The jovial Kentuckian and his stately wife, Kittie, were friends with everyone in Ripley and beyond. They had beautiful manners, and it amused Lowry that their genteel demeanor was in such stark contrast to the deportment of the hogs on which they made their money. He chuckled to see a hog stop and slobber in delight as

it gobbled up an apple core from the street. It took some getting used to, all the trash that people would throw in the middle of Main Street, but there was no place else to put the refuse. Anyway, the hogs greedily snatched it up, and there were always more lean hogs coming to town to fatten up on the garbage.

Of course, when the hogs passed through, they left pungent calling cards, and Lowry watched his step every minute. He preferred to walk on the sidewalks made out of warped boards, nailed crossways, side by side. Even the sidewalks were difficult for Mother and Ibby to navigate. The hems of the women's long skirts forever snagged in the cracks between the rough boards, but the ladies minded that less than stepping through hog manure up to six inches deep.

To be fair, the hogs were not the only offenders. Lowry bet that one horse could easily add twenty pounds of manure to the streets a day. He had mucked out enough stalls to make a good guess, and there were many horses in Ripley. Dogs, cats, and chickens, too—it all added up.

Mother and Ibby mostly avoided walking through town. The only time they enjoyed the trip was after a heavy rain, something it seemed Mother prayed for almost daily during the summer. When she craved a good clean rain to freshen the ripe air, she prayed for a sod-soaker. A gully-washer was even better in her eyes, for then it rained hard enough to wash away the manure and litter from the low places where it tended to collect. The best rain was a deluge of biblical proportions, the kind Mother called a trash-mover. A downpour like that tumbled everything in its path down the streets and into the river, even the carcasses of dead horses or cows that no one bothered to bury.

There were drawbacks to heavy rain, though. Liquid mud made the streets impassable, so Father had to leave his horse at home for a while. After the mud dried up, the whole mess started over again. A drought was just as bad, Lowry reflected.

During a long dry spell, the women held handkerchiefs to their noses and shoed away the swarms of flies that buzzed around the offal rotting in the streets. No wonder Mother's eyes watered whenever she ventured into Ripley, and no wonder she always scuttled quickly back into the house. What a stink! Dr. Campbell even speculated that the ripe air could cause cholera. Lowry did not know about that.

"Morning, John! Morning, Lowry!"

Lowry and Father tipped their hats to Dr. Campbell as they passed the public well in front of his grand white house at 114 Front Street. Lowry liked the doctor, because he never put on airs, even though he might soon be governor of Ohio. He was talking with a man whom Lowry did not know but Father seemed to.

"How are you, Thomas?" Father bellowed, putting his mouth close to the other man's ear.

The man jumped when Father spoke. "Yes, I'm Thomas Collins—oh, hello, John! What's that you said?" Under his shock of flaxen hair, he had a kind face and rosy cheeks. He cupped a brown-stained hand to his ear. Lowry's jaw dropped. Father had used his Sunday voice and the man had not heard him.

Father clapped him on the shoulder. "Good day!" he shouted and tipped his hat.

"Good day to you, sir!" Relief spread across Mr. Collins's face. He filled his bucket at the well and walked to the cabinetmaker's shop at 200 Front Street. Well, that explained the stains on the man's fingers.

"Father—" Lowry began.

"Mr. Collins is hard of hearing, son. We must be considerate of those less fortunate."

Lowry screwed up his face. "But, Father, how can he do business if he—"

"Mr. Collins's main trade is in coffins, son."

"Coffins!" Lowry exclaimed. A warning glance from Father

silenced him. Well, Lowry guessed that Mr. Collins's hearing loss would not bother him much in *that* trade.

The thought of choosing a trade made Lowry's stomach do a flip-flop. What would he be, one day? He thought about all the men he had seen this morning: Dr. Campbell, who might one day be a governor; "Jolly Bob" Patton, a deacon and a farmer; Mr. Collins, a practically deaf cabinetmaker who made coffins; and Mr. McCague, a wealthy hog butcher. To be fair, there was Father, too, a minister. Lowry sighed. He had no interest in any of those trades. How could those men abide the same tedious work day after day? At least they did their own work, he reasoned. Those who had once owned slaves had freed them long before Father came to town.

Mr. Ammen, the newspaper editor who rented part of Father's house, now *his* job sounded fine. He was a lucky man, working with that wonderful Ramage printing press all day. Lowry never got tired of watching him set type. Mr. Ammen had even let Lowry help with the press while he printed Father's letters to Uncle Thomas Rankin. Father had carefully saved every letter to his youngest brother, because he had worked so hard to convince him to set his slaves free. Uncle Thomas did set them free, to Father's joy. Father and Mr. Ammen thought other people should read those letters, too, so Mr. Ammen was printing them in book form. The press reproduced the letters ever so much faster than Father could write them by hand.

Work-saving machines fascinated Lowry. Over the summer, he had worked in the Ripley woolen mill, splicing rolls on the spinning machine for twelve and a half cents a day. At home, he had even designed a miniature inclined wheel and hitched up the uncooperative family cat to power it. The concept of saving time pleased Lowry, but his chiefest pleasure came when he watched the big machines whirring and clacking in precision.

When Lowry and Father arrived at the corner of Second and

Market streets, a tattered ball landed at their feet. Lowry nudged it with his toe. Many times back in Kentucky he had wound rags around a walnut, or even a stone, to make a padded ball like this one. He picked it up, hefted it thoughtfully, and a grin of pure pleasure spread across his face. Time enough to think of trades one day. A busy year of building and hard work had gone by without a chance to meet many Ripley boys, just the few that attended church. Now Lowry needed to fit in at a new school, and it would be fun to play with boys his own age again. "Throw it back, will you?" one coaxed. Lowry grinned and tossed the ball to a snaggle-toothed boy with red hair, and the noisy game of Annie Over resumed in the schoolyard.

"Can you run fast?" the redhead hollered. Lowry nodded. "He's on our side!" the boy announced. "Come on!"

Without a backward glance at Father, Lowry dashed to the schoolhouse steps and carefully set down Pike's Arithmetic and the English Reader, books that he brought from home. He sprinted to the far side of the one-room log schoolhouse at the redhead's heels. "You know how to play?" the boy panted.

"Mm-hmm." Lowry wasted no words. He noticed that his team had fewer boys than the other team—that meant they were losing. Here was a chance to prove himself. Lowry had won many a game of Annie Over in Kentucky. He might be small for being almost ten, but he could run like a blue streak, and if you could catch a ball and run fast, you could win at Annie Over.

The redhead's hair flashed like fire in the sun as he heaved the ball high over the schoolhouse roof. "Annie, Annie over!" he shouted. The ball disappeared over the peak and clattered down the other side. Lowry watched the sides of the schoolhouse warily until he heard "Annie, Annie over!" from the other side. He knew that meant no one had caught the ball on the fly, and sure enough, it whizzed back over the ridge and rolled off the eaves, ten feet above the ground. Now was his chance. The ball took a wicked

hop off the edge but he snatched it in midair. He dashed around the building with his whole team following in a silent pack hot on his heels. If only they could take the other team by surprise!

They caught them staring in flat-footed apprehension at the roof. Lowry tagged the closest boy, and he was captured for Lowry's team. He tagged two more boys before they could escape to safety at the other side of the building. Just like that, Lowry's team was back in the game. They all whooped and slapped his shoulders, and Lowry caught a glimpse of Father as he left the schoolyard. He waved and turned back to the game.

"That your pa?" a captured boy from the other team asked. He was quite a bit bigger than the other boys. Lowry's head just about reached his chest.

"Uh-huh," he said. "He's the preacher. Say, what time does school commence?"

The giant stared at Lowry with his mouth hanging open. "What did you say?"

"What time does school commence?"

"Did you hear that?" the boy guffawed to the others. "Whut tahm does school cum-MEE-yince?" he drawled. He rubbed his stubbly jaw. "Where are you from, anyway?"

"Kentucky." A gone feeling shot through Lowry. What had he done, he wondered, to make this half-grown-mountain of a boy laugh at him? As a knot of gleeful boys gathered, Lowry turned to walk away.

"Say something else, Kentucky boy," the ringleader taunted.

"Why? I talk plain, same as y'all."

"He talks 'pline,' he says. Haw, haw, haw! 'You-all' hear that?"

Lowry set his teeth and refused to say another word. A shrewd light crept into his tormentor's pig-like eyes. "Your preacher pa loves slaves, don't he? Where'd you get your curly yellow hair? Maybe your ma was a slave," he crooned.

That did it. Lowry tore into the big boy with both fists. The

next thing he knew, he was lying flat on his face with the breath knocked out of him and one arm twisted up behind his back—and it hurt. He felt like a draft horse had tromped on him until his insides were ground to a pulp.

“You leave him alone, Luke Means! Why do you come to school, anyway? You’re thirteen already, and you don’t want to learn!” A tiny black shoe stamped near Lowry’s face. Suddenly his arm was free. He heard a thump and a froth of white petticoat and blue-striped cotton dusted the ground beside him.

“Luke Means!” A male voice roared the name; Lowry guessed it must be the teacher. “For pushing a girl, you may go home, sir, and don’t come back to school! I’ll have the law on you if you do!”

“If I do go home, it’s because I want to, not because you or a snot-faced girl tells me to. I can make good money right now, patrolling the river for raggedy runaway slaves and running them back to their masters. What do I need school for?” Luke Means clomped away, his departure punctuated by a string of growled curses.

Air seeped back into Lowry’s lungs, but his ribs ached. He buried his face in the crook of his arm and wished he could disappear into a hole in the ground. Slavery again! Would he never escape it?

“Are you all right?” The owner of the striped cotton dress stood next to him as she smoothed her skirts.

Then and there, Lowry decided not to speak at school that day unless a teacher spoke to him. He nodded his head; it hurt too much to move anything else.

“Can I help you any?” Doubt laced her voice.

Lowry wagged his head back and forth. The girl had already done enough. He did not want her to come to his rescue again.

“Well, all right. That Luke is a bad one. Sometimes I feel like I just have to *do* something, you know. School takes up in a min-

ute, so you'd better come on." She chattered enough for both of them, Lowry thought.

The girl sashayed toward the building. Curiosity overcame Lowry's discomfort and he peeped at his benefactress. Long golden ringlets lay in shining waves on her shoulders beneath her sunbonnet. She looked back once. She had a sweet face with very blue eyes that bored into Lowry's. She smiled.

"Come along, Mandy! Leave that Kentucky boy be." A taller girl shook her finger.

"I'm coming, Julie Ann, but you needn't think you can boss me just because you're the big sister. Mama said you mayn't."

As Mandy tripped into the schoolhouse, Lowry lay still for a moment before creaking to his feet like an old man. The schoolyard spun and he swayed, but gulps of fresh air could not cure him. A single smile and eyes as blue as cornflowers had muddled his senses more than any bully ever could.