An Upstream Battle

An Upstream Battle:

John Parker’s Personal War

on Slavery

by Anne Stanton

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Anne Stanton

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This book is dedicated to my children,

Jake and Laura Stanton

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## Chapter 6

***Ripley, Ohio (1858)***

Tim was running late. He had only recently taken over responsibility for opening the foundry office on Mondays, but today he had overslept. Tim and John were friends, but John was a punctual person who expected the same from his employees. Tim rushed toward the office, hoping John wasn’t there yet. The Ripley Foundry and Machine Company had been good for Tim and he was grateful for the work. It could be hard for immigrants to find and keep a job, especially when those immigrants were Irish. So it was with a mixture of surprise and aggravation when, as he came around the corner of the building, Tim saw a young white man sitting on the front step. At first he thought this was someone who had come to sell old scrap iron. As he got closer he recognized the man as James Sroufe, the son of Sebastian Sroufe, a farmer in Kentucky and one of John’s customers.

Tim fumbled in his pocket for the office key. In a thick Irish brogue he said, “Hello, James, you’re here early today, aren’t you?”

“Hello, Mr. O’Carrol. How are you?” Both men were in their twenties, although James was the smaller and less muscular of the two.

“I’m well, thanks,” Tim said as he opened the door. He thought to himself, if you only knew how happy I am that my boss isn’t here yet. “So, is your father unhappy with the press we sold you last month?” Tim opened the door and started moving boxes of metal castings from a stack on the floor to a large table by the window.

“Why, no, that’s not it at all,” said James, surprised at the question. “I’m here because I need to find work.”

Tim stopped fussing with the boxes. He turned completely around and peered at James over the top of his eyeglasses. He asked slowly, “Are you sure, James?” Tim was surprised because he knew James’s father owned slaves and John Parker, the foundry’s owner, was a black man.

“Well, I’ve been trying to find work at some of the foundries in Maysville, but they’re not hiring. Then I thought of coming here.”

Tim asked, “Is your father aware of this?”

James paused, then said, “Sure, he knows, and he’s not happy about it. But what’s a man to do? He doesn’t want me going as far as Cincinnati for work, either. Says he needs me to help out on the farm, says he needs me to stay close.”

“That’s a ‘pickle’ if I ever heard one,” said Tim.

Just then, John opened the door to the office and stepped in, his arms loaded with ledger books and drawings. He noticed James Sroufe and said, “Hello, James, you’re sure here earlier than usual.” John scanned the room and added, “Are you here alone or is your father with you?” James had previously only come to the foundry with his father.

“Hello, Mr. Parker. No, my father’s not here with me. I came over yesterday evening and stayed with a friend last night. I wanted to be here bright and early,” James said as he reached out to shake hands with John.

John placed his books on the cluttered table and shook hands with James as he shot a confused look in Tim’s direction. “James is here looking for work, John,” Tim said, with an amused grin he made no effort to hide.

“Well, what do you know about that,” said John, somewhat confused.

“Yes, that’s right, Mr. Parker. I’m trying to find work. I’d like to work for you—that is, if you need another man.”

“Well, James, that sounds fine,” said John. “Let me think. We really can use another hand around here, odd jobs mostly—at least to start. But that’s only if you’re willing to work hard. Foundry work isn’t for everyone. It’s hot and dirty, but I can promise you, sleeping at night is easy.”

James said, “I worked from time to time for Mr. Ladenburger, the blacksmith in Dover, so I know what hard work is.”

Tim couldn’t help but interject, “And James says he’s even talked to his poppa about working here.”

“That so?” asked John, his eyebrows lifted high.

James wasn’t sure whether Tim was teasing him or speaking in earnest, “Yes, he knows I’ve been trying to find work for a while now.”

“That’s fine, James,” said John. “Do you plan to stay here in Ripley then?”

“It’s easy enough to take the ferry back home at night, but I can stay here with friends, too, if need be,” said James.

“Well, then, you’re hired. We can talk about how much you’ll earn once I’ve seen what you’re able to do. Tim will get you situated,” said John. Then he added, “We start every day at seven am sharp,” John paused a moment and said, “Right Tim?” as he stared at Tim who squirmed under his gaze. “Just so you know, I saw you running across the yard as I was walking over from the house. Those late nights at Pfeiffer’s tavern will get you every time, my friend,” John laughed. “Go get James started collecting the sprue from yesterday’s cast, then come back so we can go over these drawings. I’ve got a couple of ideas I want to run by you before we set them up for a run.”

“Sure thing, boss,” said Tim, smiling. “C’mon, James,” he said as he led James out of the office by a side door. John stood by the office window watching the two men cross the yard to the foundry. John shook his head in disbelief at what had just happened; the son of a slaveowner had asked him, a former slave, for a job. He never thought he’d live to see the day when that would happen.

James was the ideal employee, at least for the first couple of months. He arrived on time, stayed late when necessary and worked hard without complaint. But soon the reality of working for a black man ate away at him, particularly because the black man was John Parker.

John was known throughout the area as a man who valued good work, and treated his employees and customers fairly. But he was also known as a man who would break the law to help runaway slaves. Though he had never been caught in the act, rumors of John’s escapades had circulated widely among both white and black residents of the valley for years. John was especially fond of the times when a story would get back to him that had been exaggerated.

The reality was that a small core group of people in Ripley had been devoted to helping runaways for many years. However, the vast majority of white people in town and throughout the area were strongly pro-slavery, so John had many enemies, some of whom were friends of James and his family. These contrasting visions of John as both boss and slave rescuer were difficult for James to reconcile.

One day James reached his limit. He and John were machining some parts out of listening range of the other employees. James spoke in a voice so low only John could hear him, “Word is you like to prowl around at night helping runaways cross the river.”

John tried to appear surprised at the allegation and said, “James, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve got a business to run and you know that it takes all my waking hours.”

“John Taylor told me you’re rowing over to Kentucky all the time at night,” said James.

“You know as well as I do that helping runaways is illegal. I’d get thrown in jail for doing what you’re suggesting. Now get back to work on those orders for Wednesday’s shipment before that imagination of yours gets the better of you.” John motioned toward the half-finished pallet of soil pulverizers on the floor next to James as a means of shifting his attention back to his work. John walked away and heard James grumble something inaudible under his breath.

James couldn’t stop himself from taunting John and made similar comments whenever he had the chance. About a week later James said, “You’re such a brave fellow, why don’t you run off some of my old man’s people?”

John pretended to lose his patience. He waved his hands around and raised his voice saying, “James, I don’t know where you get all your crazy ideas. You must be hanging around those boys from the tavern too much. You’ve all got your mind made up about something that’s pure fantasy.” James was disappointed because he hadn’t been able to provoke John into admitting anything. He returned to his work, but didn’t know had provoked John, just not in the way he had intended.

Something inside John shifted that day. He became fully committed to running off at least one of the Sroufe slaves, just to spite James. And, after some thought, he decided which slave he wanted to free. Several weeks earlier James had come to the shop with his father and a young slave named Will, a man in his early twenties. Will was strong and represented a valuable asset to the Sroufes. John’s mind was made up; he was going to free Will as soon as possible.

That evening after his children had gone to bed, John got into his ‘going across the river’ clothes. Miranda was on the couch reading a book when he came downstairs and said, “I’ll be back in a few hours. I’m going over the river to talk to some folks.”

She barely glanced up from her book, saying, “I’ll keep the light on. Please be careful about which folks you talk to.”

He smiled and said, “You know I will.” Then he kissed her lightly and left the house saying, “Be sure to bolt the door.” He waited on the front step until he heard the door bolt engaging.

From inside the house Miranda said, “Happy?”

“Now I am!” he called out as he crossed the front yard and walked toward his boat on the river bank.

John was now a quick and efficient rower, and before long he was ashore in Kentucky. He tied the boat to a small birch sapling and climbed the shallow bank to the road. When he heard voices he ducked behind some large weeds. A few minutes later two men on horseback rode quickly past John’s hiding place; one man smoked a cigar. John identified the voice of the smoker as James Sroufe and assumed the other rider was the slave named Will. Soon, a single rider returned, but it was too dark for John to know who it was. He thought the rider was Will because the man wasn’t smoking.

John followed the rider at a safe distance, but when they reached a clearing he realized his mistake. He had been following James, not Will, so he darted into the woods to hide. Sroufe heard the noise and, thinking it was the dogs, called them, “Major! Shiloh! What are you doing?” John flattened his body against a fallen log, hoping the dogs wouldn’t find him. He stayed motionless, trying not to breathe, as the damp smell of the decaying log permeated his nostrils. The dogs were within 25 feet of John when James called out again, “Hey, Major! Get over here you dumb mutt!” This time the dogs ran straight back to James, who cast one last glance over his shoulder and continued on his route.

John stayed by the log for a long time after James left with the dogs. He didn’t like close calls and he definitely distrusted other people’s dogs. When he felt it was safe to venture out he snuck back to his boat and rowed home. John hadn’t achieved his goal, but he hadn’t given up either.

He returned to Kentucky the following night armed with greater caution. When he reached the Sroufe farm he found that the slave quarters were adjacent to the main house, too close for comfort. He waited near the road for an opportunity to speak to Will, rather than risk being detected by someone in the house. Unfortunately, no one left the slave cabins that night so John went home empty-handed a second time.

James taunted John again the next day, this time including Tim in the conversation. “Tim, you know Mr. Parker ought to run off with some of my daddy’s people. He’s got five people, six if you count the new baby. I’ll bet he couldn’t run them off even if they wanted to leave—which I’m sure they don’t. They like us.”

Tim looked at John and said, “That’s crazy talk, James. You know full well your poppa’s a customer here, and Mr. Parker would never do anything like that, especially to a customer! Isn’t that so, Mr. Parker?” He shot a grin at John.

“You know that’s the truth, Tim,” said John. But in his heart he renewed his promise to run off at least one of the Sroufe slaves.

John donned his disguise again that night and rowed across the river a third time. The sky was cloudless with a nearly full moon. Like the first night, John was hidden beside the road when two men passed on horseback. He crept to a nearby cornfield to get a better view. Moments later, one man returned. This time John clearly identified the man as Will, the slave he wanted to free.

“Will, Will!” John whispered from among the corn stalks.

Will stopped and said, “I’m not sure who you are or what you want, but I’ll talk to you down the road a piece, near the bend in the road.” Will proceeded in the opposite direction to see whether Sroufe was following, then changed direction, and went to the spot where he planned to meet the stranger from the cornfield. John met him there.

“I’m over here,” said John quietly.

Will approached with apprehension saying, “Who are you and how do you know my name?”

“I’m John Parker, from Ripley,” said John as he walked toward Will. “You came to my foundry with James Sroufe and his father a few weeks ago.”

Will recognized the Parker name right away. He had heard stories about John Parker for years and had been pleased to meet him at the foundry. John’s ability to help slaves run away without getting caught was legendary in northern Kentucky, particularly among slaves. He asked, “What do you want with me, Mr. Parker?”

“I want to help you get out of here—right now Will, tonight! I can take you across the river and help you find other folks who’ll help you get further north.” He paused and added, “You could be in Cleveland or New York, Canada even, in a couple of weeks. Free. Forever.”

“That’s great, Mr. Parker,” said Will, "but I’ve got a wife and new baby. I can’t just up and leave them right now.”

“I understand,” said John. Then he paused and added, “Then I’ll take all three of you. Be ready tomorrow night.”

“We can’t be ready tomorrow, Mr. Parker. Can’t we do this next week?” asked Will.

“Will, what do you need to do? I’m offering you freedom!?” John was perplexed. He examined Will’s face for some spark of understanding. “These things go best when you get up and do them right away.” John was exasperated at Will’s reluctance and he was also fully aware that people have a hard time keeping secrets, especially secrets about something as important as running away. It meant saying goodbye to family and friends with the knowledge that you would probably never see them again. A secret like that proved too powerful for many people to keep to themselves and John had seen many escape plots undone by loose lips. “Don’t think about it too much—just bring the clothes on your back and go. Tell your wife to bundle up the baby. I’ll come back tomorrow night.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Parker. I know you’re trying to help and all, but I can’t see us leaving that soon. My wife had the baby only a couple of days ago and, well, it’s been hard on her. She’s not ready for traveling yet,” said Will.

John said, “Well, I guess I can wait if you’re sure she can’t be ready tomorrow. Next week’ll have to do. But Will, don’t breathe a word of this to anyone. No one, you hear? I mean it. One hint of this plan in old man Sroufe’s ear could be disastrous—especially for you and your wife.”

“I’ll keep it quiet, Mr. Parker,” said Will. “I’m good at secrets.”

“Good,” said John, “I’ll come for you next week—Tuesday. I’ll row over after midnight. You and your wife and baby need to be ready, understand? I’ll be waiting in my skiff by the cornfield downstream of the main house. I know people who will help you on your way north, so you don’t need to worry about anything. Don’t let me down, Will.”

Will replied, “Yes, sir, Mr. Parker, I’m—” then he shrieked, his eyes filled with terror. John turned around in time to see a shadowy figure behind him with a club raised high, ready to strike. John instinctively jumped to one side. The club missed his head, but struck his left shoulder so hard that he staggered from the weight of the blow and fell to one knee. Will sprinted toward his horse and was gone.

The man dropped the club and took his opportunity to attack John. Both men fell to the ground. John struggled to throw the man off, but couldn’t. His assailant worked his way onto John’s back, pressing his face into the dirt. Finally, John broke free of the man’s grasp and threw him off his back. As the man reached for the club, John grabbed a handful of dirt and mercilessly rubbed it into the man’s eyes.

This was John’s chance to escape and he seized it. He sprinted straight to his boat as the man lay on the ground crying out in pain. Adrenaline surging, John made it to the Ohio side of the river in record time. Somehow he didn’t feel any pain in his shoulder. That would start an hour later. John hadn’t seen the face of the man who had jumped him, but assumed it was James Sroufe.

The next day John’s shoulder was swollen and throbbing, so he decided to take it easy and work in the foundry office rather than do any physical labor. It saved him from experiencing additional pain, but he also didn’t want anyone, especially James, to see him favor his shoulder because of the pain. John was concerned James would confront him about the fight in Kentucky the night before. But that didn’t happen. James arrived on time and greeted everyone, including John, in his usual manner. He didn’t act suspiciously in any way, nor did his face show any sign of having been in a fight.

Later that day Silas, a friend of John’s from Ripley, stopped by the foundry office for a visit.

“Afternoon, John, how’ve you been?” asked Silas.

“Afternoon, Silas. I’m fine, though I’m a bit tired today,” said John. “How’s your family?”

“They’re fine, thanks. Did you hear about the slave catcher in Kentucky last night?” asked Silas.

Now he had John’s attention. “No, I haven’t heard anything. What happened in Kentucky last night with a slave catcher?” John tried to act as though he were only half-interested.

“Well,” said Silas, “seems he was chasing a runaway and they got into an awful scuffle. Since you’re generally the one who’s in the know about these things, I thought you might have some information.”

John rubbed his shoulder and decided to keep the identity of that particular “fugitive” to himself. He said, “Well, this is one of those times when I have no idea who it might be, I only hope whoever it was got away.”

Silas replied, “Well, the way the story’s been circulating all over town, the runaway beat the slaver up pretty bad. I’m thinking that’s the kind of runaway who gets away.”

“I hope you’re right about that,” said John.

The rest of the week passed without incident. The day John had agreed to help Will and his family escape was the day James decided to poke at John once more about not being able to run off his father’s slaves.

“I’m a bit disappointed, Mr. Parker. I had heard all these stories about how good you are at running off slaves and I’m just not seeing it,” said James with a toothy grin. I guess it’s true what they say about slaves, you know, about them being happy and all.” James chuckled as he walked away, thinking he’d gotten the last word in.

John replied, “I guess it’s all in your perspective, James.” He was smiling too, in anticipation of the evening that was planned.

## Chapter 7

John’s previous conversation with Will had ended so abruptly he wasn’t certain whether Will and his wife would be ready to leave as planned. But John was determined to free them to show James Sroufe a thing or two. He left Ripley around midnight and rowed across the river to a spot downstream of the Sroufe house. Then he sat in his rowboat, listening and waiting. The light of the moon was obscured by a high cloud haze, and a warm breeze turned the sycamore leaves bottom side up. After waiting for more than an hour, John became concerned. It was getting late and he suspected Will had changed his mind, so he concealed the boat under an elderberry bush, and walked through the corn field to the slave quarters.

The slave shacks were run-down, extremely small and without windows. Four were clustered together along a dirt path about 100 feet below the Sroufe’s two-story brick house. John was almost to the shacks when he noticed a light in a window of the main house. He interpreted that as a bad sign at so late an hour. Unsure of what he should do next, John hesitated. He was concerned that the Sroufes knew about Will’s plan to escape. Just then, a figure exited one of the shacks. It was Will.

“Over here!” hissed John. Will walked toward the voice in the corn field. The slump of his shoulders indicated a general sense of defeat.

As he approached, Will whispered, “Oh, Mr. Parker, it’s not going to work!” He motioned toward the main house. “Old man Sroufe knows something’s going on. He takes our baby to his room every night so we don’t run off.” Will pointed toward the Sroufe house. “He’s there in the room with the light. Told me he sleeps with two horse pistols beside the bed. I believe he’s telling the truth, too.”

“I had a feeling something had happened,” John mumbled.

Will’s voice trembled as he said, “My wife’ll never leave without that baby. That’s not going to happen.”

“So that’s what’s going on. I need a few minutes to think this over. Go on back to your cabin, but leave the door open a crack.” John stood among the corn stalks and watched Will return to his cabin. He felt a flash of defeat at his inability to make this rescue happen as planned. But the sense of defeat lasted only a few brief moments until he began to plot new ways of getting Will and his family to Ohio.

John entered the small room a few minutes later. Will and his wife were sitting on a bench near the hearth, Will’s arm was around his wife’s shoulder. John knew there was no point in trying to find out how Sroufe had learned of their plan. It would only anger him and discourage the people he needed to have cooperate. John said, “Will, you and your wife get your things together so we can get going. Your baby’s going to be fine here and I think—”

“No sir, Mr. Parker. I’m not leaving without my baby,” Will’s wife pleaded. “I won’t do it! I can’t!” Tears streamed down her cheeks.

John was not unsympathetic. He couldn’t imagine running for his own freedom while leaving one of his children behind—particularly an infant. After contemplating their options, John suggested, “Will, you know the house. Why don’t you sneak in there and get your child?”

“No, not me. That man’s as mean as the devil himself—and he’s crazy too!” Will was animated as he described the man holding his child hostage. “He sleeps with loaded horse pistols beside his bed. I know he’d shoot without hesitation!”

“But Will, c’mon, what’s the chance of actually getting shot?” John asked. “You have the advantage of darkness and the element of surprise. Get your child and you can leave here forever. You’ll be free!”

“Or dead,” Will growled. “I’m not going in there, not tonight, not ever.”

John thought for a moment, then he turned to Will’s wife and offered, “Why don’t you go in? You know the house, don’t you?”

She considered the idea for a moment, but Will stood up, putting his arm in front of her, “No! That’s not going to happen. She’s not going in there either!”

For John, the decision to liberate Will and his family wasn’t negotiable. He simply wasn’t willing to return to Ohio without them. James Sroufe had irritated a nerve in him that could only be soothed by the release of their slaves. He thought for a long time before saying, “I guess I’ll go get your baby, then.” He leaned toward them, “You two go wait for me on the bank. That’s where you’ll find my skiff. Get it ready to go and stay hid in the cornfield until you see me coming. If you hear gunfire, run back here as fast as you can and pretend you were sleeping. You can’t let on you know anything, you hear?”

Will and his wife both nodded.

Then John turned to Will’s wife, “Now, you need to tell me absolutely everything about the house. I need to know where the doors are, where your baby’s being held and where every single stick of furniture is. I can’t be bumping into anything in the dark if I want to make it out alive.” Will’s wife had worked in the Sroufe house for years and knew the details of the building, its furnishings and the habits of its owners.

John questioned her for 10 minutes about every detail she could remember of the house. When he was convinced he had enough information, John regarded his shoes and mumbled something to himself about having worn the wrong pair. He untied the shoes and handed them to Will. “Here, take my shoes and hold onto them for me. This is serious, so listen carefully. You need to burn these shoes if there’s any trouble. They’re nearly brand new, and if the man I bought them from lets on they’re mine, they’ll know I helped you escape. Did you hear what I said? Burn them up if there’s trouble. It’s important you do it straight away. You can’t let on you know me. Nothing at all, you hear?”

“But Mr. Parker,” said Will, “you sure you want to go into the house? That man will shoot you!”

“I’m not about to let that happen Will,” John said firmly.

Will and his wife began gathering their belongings. John intervened, “Travel as light as you possibly can. It makes it easier, believe me. The most important thing for you to bring is your baby. There are plenty of folks along the way who will give you all the clothes and food you’ll need. Bring as little as possible.” Will’s wife quickly scanned the room, then grabbed a small bag. John’s shoes were slung over Will’s shoulder, tied together by the laces.

“Now, I need to tell you a few more things,” said John quietly, as they were about to leave. “First, when you get to the river, set Sroufe’s skiff adrift in the current. Make sure to push it way out into the current, far enough they won’t be able to chase us. That should buy us a little time. Second, Will, I want you to lay down in the middle of the skiff, so they’ll only see two people. Hopefully they’ll think it was just you and your wife leaving with the baby.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Parker, we can do that,” said Will with a peculiar expression of fear and excitement on his face. “Good luck.”

“Thanks, I’ll need as much luck as I can get.” They all silently left the cabin. Will and his wife darted toward the cornfield. John waited a few moments steeling his nerve before he sneaked to the Sroufe house.

Before stepping onto the porch, John gazed across the valley toward Ripley. High on the hill above town, on the Ohio side of the river the lamp in the window of the Rankin house shone like a beacon, as it did most nights. That simple lamp had guided countless runaways to freedom and was a local legend. John had seen it many times before but it had never felt as welcoming to him as it did at this moment. That image of hope coupled with nearly overwhelming fear almost immobilized him.

Slowly, silently, John crossed the porch and laid his hand on the kitchen door. It was unlocked, just as Will’s wife had predicted. He gently raised the latch and slowly, very slowly opened the door. It squeaked a little. John entered the house and waited at the threshold a few minutes so his eyes could adjust to the dark interior. He propped the door wide open behind him to ensure a quick exit.

John stood perfectly still and investigated the room he was about to enter. He recognized the silhouette of a large table surrounded by four ladder back chairs. A large bowl had been placed in the middle of the table and a wash basin and stand were on the left. The fireplace was to the right. As he waited in the dark stillness of a slaveowner’s house, John nearly lost his nerve. Had there been a sound from the occupants of the house, any sound at all, he would no doubt have left without the baby. But the only sound he was aware of was the thumping of his own heart.

John edged toward his target by putting all his weight on one foot and gently rolling from heel to toe on the other foot as he gradually shifted his weight. The rough-hewn wooden planks creaked. As he approached the bedroom door, he desperately tried to control his emotions so his thoughts could remain clear. He tried to focus his attention completely on the child in the next room, rather than his own fear. Step by cautious step John moved closer to the bedroom, guided by light that streamed into the kitchen from under a large crack at the bottom of the door.

He finally reached the door to the room where he knew he would find old man Sroufe and the baby. John hesitated. This was the most dangerous situation in which he had ever willingly placed himself. He had helped scores of runaway slaves over the years, but never before entered the home of a slaveowner in the middle of the night, especially one known to be well-armed. John was terrified, and for good reason. He began to question his motivation. Was it just to spite a young man who had a big mouth and a bad attitude? Was that enough to risk everything he had spent his entire life building?

John put his hand on the latch of the bedroom door but then withdrew, unable to continue. He tried once more and, again, his nerves failed him. A million things raced across his mind as he stood there, ready to enter the bedroom of a man who wouldn’t think twice about killing him. John remembered the faces of some of the runaways he had helped to escape. But it was when he thought about his own children asleep in bed back home that fear was replaced with more useful emotion. Anger rose as he imagined how it would feel to have someone take one of his children as ransom day after day. That image gave John the courage he needed to press his thumb into the latch and open the door to his fate. All hesitation was now over, retreat no longer possible.

With the latch lifted, John gently pressed his hand against the bedroom door. It gave way and swung open a few inches, squeaking loudly. He stopped and waited. He was close enough to hear the regular breathing of old man Sroufe and his wife lying a few feet away. He waited, motionless, counting slowly. By the time he had counted to 50 he felt certain they were still asleep. John pushed the door wide open, despite the squeaking.

With the door completely open, John was able to see a wrought iron bed with two occupants. A tall wardrobe filled the wall to his right, opposite the bed. On the far side of the room curtains fluttered in a half-open window. A wooden chair next to the bed on the old man’s side held a lit candle and two large pistols, just as Will had predicted. John couldn’t see the baby from his vantage point but assumed the child was near the woman.

Suddenly, old man Sroufe turned over in his sleep. John’s heart raced. He was sure the pounding in his chest was loud enough to wake the dead. He remained motionless until he felt confident Sroufe was still asleep, then he crouched down and began to crawl, slowly, on his hands and knees. As John rounded the far side of the bed, the door slammed shut behind him. The sound so startled him that he caught his breath, certain the sound of the slamming door would be enough to awaken the Sroufes. But still they didn’t wake up. John waited, frozen in place, and slowly counted to 50 again. Then he continued.

When he finally reached the far side of the bed John saw a small bundle lying close to the edge. He assumed this was the baby. He drew the bundle toward himself by gently tugging at the corner of the blanket the child was swaddled in. Then he crouched over the bed to take the baby into his arms. At that moment a breeze from the open window blew out the candle next to the old man. The room was now in total darkness and John had the child under his protection. With no more reason for secrecy, he rose to his full height, opened the door, and ran out of the room without regard for how much noise he made. He clutched the baby to his chest with both arms.

Old man Sroufe woke up with a snort. He grumbled something unintelligible and knocked over the chair by the bed. The pistols fell to the floor with a thud and Sroufe cursed as he scrambled to find them in the dark.