

Wednesday  
October 3, 1810  
Johnson's Tavern  
Reliance, Maryland

Dawn was still a couple of hours away and in the tavern at Johnston's Corner, just over the state line in Maryland from Sussex County, Delaware. Patty Cannon was serving breakfast at four a.m., assisted by her teenage daughter Lucretia, a well formed girl, with flaming red hair, and a purple port-wine stain across most of her face that looked as if it could have been applied with a single stroke of a wide paintbrush. There was still an hour before the passengers on the stage line would have to be roused and fed, so those gathered about her table were Patty's cohorts from the gang of paddy rollers that she headed.

Paddy rollers was the Negro term for the thugs who caught escaped slaves and returned them for the reward. The word was a bastardization of: patroller. Paddy rollers were a vigilante police force used by planters to control the movement of all African Americans in rural areas and to catch and return runaway slaves for the bounty.

But, now that the price of slaves was so high, the paddy rollers of Maryland, had turned to kidnapping free blacks in neighboring Delaware, then selling them to a slave buyer from Norfolk who would cast them into a life of bondage down south to fill the growing and seemingly insatiable demands of the cotton industry. With the invention of the cotton gin, the south was experiencing a phenomenal growth in the cotton market. Despite the huge profit to be had in the crop, cotton was laborious to grow and harvest, and with the slave embargo, the manpower supply situation was approaching crisis proportions.

Patty dearly wanted to turn some quick dollars, and had her gang assembled well in advance of dawn so as to coordinate their actions during the coming day to this end. But she knew they wouldn't listen to her if they were hungry, so she was feeding them so they would pay attention to her plans. She used a large discolored wooden spoon to plop thick dollops of hominy grits onto the tin plates and topped it with a spoonful of red-eye gravy. After making sure everyone had been served, she poured herself a cup of rank chicory laced coffee, sat down at the head of the table and made an announcement: "The slave agent is coming up from Norfolk in six weeks. I've already told you all to keep your eyes peeled for likely prospects...so have you seen any easy pickin's, lads?"

There was much shuffling of feet, and muffled coughing, but there were no responses. After a few moments of silence she said, "Hmm. A fine lot you are. That's why we're gettin' an early start, to make up for you all being so behind in your work." Patty knew before she spoke that none of her crew had done anything other than get drunk in the recent past, and that she'd get exactly the response she'd gotten—Hell, she'd supplied the liquor. She just wanted to make them feel guilty about letting her down so that they would pay attention to her present plans and get off their asses. If her plans were carried out, as she was determined they would be, everyone had a lot to do that day—her men knew better than to cross her when her mind was set on something. She was stronger than most men and could whip any man she'd ever met—be it at brawling, wrestling, or knife fights, and they would all go out the tavern door that day fed and

ready to carry out their assigned tasks. She spoke again, “So none of you lunkheads have any prospects of easy targets. Not even you, Jesse?”

Her husband, Jesse, bristled at being called a lunkhead and said, “My job is to catch ’em and deliver ’em...you’re the one always prides ’er self on being able to pick out a likely prospect.”

“I’m just askin’,” she replied as her gaze went from face to face around the table. It was a family business—besides her husband Jesse, there were: her son-in-law Hank and his brother Bob Brereton; Jesse’s cousins Isaac and Clement Cannon; Joseph Griffiths, a hired hand on the ferry; and Joe Johnson, who though the owner of the tavern, rented it to Patty who ran the business and used it for her base of operations.

At a small side table a black man sat eating alone, to whom Patty turned and said, “What about you, Jack? What do you think?”

“I’m just a dumb ol’ nigger that nobody ever asks nothin’,” said Jack, a free black who worked for Patty and who lured other free blacks into a false sense of security until he or one of his cohorts could get the drop on their victim. He was deprecating the importance of his role, for Jack was the eyes and ears of Patty’s operation. She depended on him to target the victims least likely to raise an alarm or spawn a search by their disappearance—people who could be counted on to vanish quietly. There was always trouble if one grabbed a slave, they were property, but rustling free negroes was a cake job.

Jack Purnell willingly sold out his fellow Negroes partly because he did what he needed to. Being a free black man was often more challenging than being a slave with a place to live and food to eat. And partly he was afraid of Patty, if she needed another black head to sell south it might be his. He participated with apparent willingness to make ends meet and remain free. After numerous encounters he had become desensitized. He had rationalized it to the point of deer hunting. It didn’t matter what the moral cost was. He had become willing to pay.

“Well, I’m asking you right now,” said Patty.

Ordinarily reticent to speak up in front of so many ignorant and belligerent crackers, Jack hesitated, but decided since the Boss Lady had requested him to speak no one would dare lash out at him for speaking, he would give his opinion. “I reckon the next time one of them abolitionist Methodist preachers has a camp meeting, we could hang around and keep an eye on folks comin’ and goin’. There’s a lot of free niggers ’tends them things and huntin’ could be pretty good.”

“It shames me to see a nigger that’s smarter than my own family, but we’re gonna do just what he said. We’re also gonna continue keepin’ a close eye on the ferry.” Patty was referring to the ferry across the Nanticoke that her husband’s family had operated for generations at the place called, Cannon’s Ferry. Patty continued irritably, “We only got two niggers chained in the attic here so far, and time’s a-wastin’. That slave dealer will be here before you know it.”

“There was one took the ferry yesterday, said he was on his way to a wedding at Snavely’s. A cooper from up on the Murderkill River,” Joe Griffiths said.

“Sure he was free?” Patty asked.

“Yep, he seemed uppity enough to be a free one all right.”

“It ain’t worth the effort to kidnap a slave. Their rightful owners would have the law down on us sure as shit, lookin’ for stolen property,” Patty said.

Three quarters of Delaware's blacks were free and the vast majority of slaves were concentrated in Sussex County—the abundance of free blacks made for good business for Patty's gang. Even though free, any black man who traveled without a white man accompanying him risked abduction.

Bob Brereton hawked and spat in the general direction of the spittoon and said, "There's a pack of free nigras working at the new mill and the forge up in Middleford... we could recon-oyster the sitchy-ation by pretendin' we're lookin' into gittin' some work done at the forge..."

Lucretia dropped her spoon loudly on her plate and rose without finishing her meal.

"What's wrong with Jellyface?" Jesse asked. He constantly disparaged his step-daughter's appearance by referring to her birthmark. All the members of the Cannon gang ridiculed her and they each had their own favorite nickname to berate her with—besides Jellyface, she was often referred to as Old Paint, Whortleberry Stain or whatever other abusive monikers they could conger.

Lucretia was a handsome woman from behind, with a pleasant shapeliness, and a gentle soul. But she was lonely and isolated, feeling shunned and apart as she did from *normal* people because of the constant denigrating commentary she endured. Though the male members of Patty's gang often joked how she'd have to find a blind man if she was ever to marry, it did not stop them from forcing their attentions on her. They added insult to injury by telling her how lucky she was that they didn't make her wear a sack over her head.

She generally stayed in the kitchen or worked in the garden to keep out of sight of the tavern clientele. When alone, she liked to hum Methodist hymns that she'd learned from the itinerant preacher who frequented the area—he was one of the few people who succored, rather than ridiculed, her.

Patty frowned at her daughter, who could not be convinced to participate willingly in the family business. "Why you lookin' so glum, Lucretia? I'd think anybody as ugly as you would be less uppity. You don't feel sorry for the niggers do ya?"

Lucretia replied, "It just aint right. A man works his way to freedom and you kidnap him and sell him back into slavery. How would you like it if it happened to you?"

Patty spat on the floor to show her disgust with the comment, "I ought to cuff you. We're white. They're niggers. Don't matter if they're free or not. In fact, they're better off as slaves, then they don't have to worry about supporting themselves."

Jesse stopped shoveling food into his mouth and chimed in, "Yup, that's a fact. Plus, no one misses a free nigger when he disappears."

"It might be kinder to kidnap a Negro who's already a slave, at least he wouldn't miss his freedom," said Lucretia.

Losing her temper Patty shouted, "Well, if'n you're not gonna eat, and you're high and mighty to help us earn an honest dollar returnin' niggers to their natural state, you just follow your purple nose to the kitchen and start scrubbin' that stack of dirty dishes."

Pointing her finger at them Lucretia said sternly, "Reverend Passwaters says that what you're doing is a sin, that slavery is an abomination, and that you'll all go to Hell if you don't stop and look after your souls."

Moving across the ten feet that separated them in an instant, Patty boxed Lucretia's ear with such force that the girl crumbled to the ground sobbing. "First off, you ain't got no call discussin' family business with no outsider, and second, if you're so righteous in

the Lord to be preachin' to us, how come he made you with that mark across your face—as a sign of His love?” Grabbing the girl by the upper arm she yanked Lucretia to her feet and propelled her towards the kitchen with a shove that would have set a loaded wagon moving. “I'd say God must hate you.”

Everyone laughed and snorted with amusement at Patty's handling of Lucretia, and Patty returned to the table and sat down saying, “That'll keep her in line for a while. Now let's get back to business.”