

## Underground Railroad: Turtle On A Fence



1 Hope Strong was walking alongside the dirt road into town as she often does after  
2 breakfast, past the neighboring farms of her community, when she was met with  
3 a queer site that stopped her in her tracks. Just across the road, on old Mr.  
4 Purgat's fence, sat a turtle, perfectly balanced on the post. It seemed to be  
5 waiting for a strong wind to blow it to the ground. But on what side of the fence  
6 would that old turtle fall?

7 "I love my sister and her children," Hope thought to herself. "But it might be  
8 coming time for me to sell the farm and move out of Waukesha County, maybe  
9 up north near the Lakes. It won't be long before Saoirse can look after things  
10 here."

11 Hope Strong was a widower who lost her only child to the pox some years ago, and had managed to keep her  
12 husband's small farm going with the help of field hands and good neighbors.

13 "..."We thank the Lord for this our daily bread, and that you keep this family healthy and safe from harm. In  
14 Jesus Christ's name we pray, Amen."

15 "Amen." Ignavus Rhodes' wife and two children echoed the closing of their dinner prayers before the start  
16 of their meal.

17 "What news of the runaway Negroes from the South? I heard talk about town this morning," asked  
18 Ignavus' wife.

19 "Talk you would do well to steer clear of," warned Ignavus. "Ask your sister – maybe she knows something  
20 about it," he continued.

21 "Those are just rumors. I'm sure Hope knows nothing about it," Ignavus' wife assured him.

22 "All those Free Soilers and Whigs are to blame for this nasty business. I wouldn't be surprised if Ed Holton  
23 was involved. We need someone like Barstow to put a stop to it!" Ignavus proclaimed.

24 "Who is Ed Holton?" Asked their young son.

25 "There are slaves running away and father thinks Aunt Hope is helping them," interjects the boy's older  
26 sister, Saoirse.

27 "Mind your tongue young lady!" Her father snapped, offering a glance at his wife, as if to suggest his  
28 daughter inherited her disposition from his wife's side of the family.

29 "You say you don't agree with slavery, but you sell them our crops and tip your hat to them on Sundays,"  
30 she said.

31 "That's enough! Have you forgotten who you're speaking to? You have no idea what you're talking about.  
32 Go feed the horses and then go to bed before you get the switch!" Ignavus said, watching Saoirse as she defiantly  
33 stormed out of the house and towards the barn.

34 "I don't want her spending time with Hope. That's where she's getting that mouth from," Ignavus  
35 complained to his wife.

36 "Finish your potatoes, sweetheart." Ignavus' wife encouraged their son to finish his dinner, attempting to ignore  
37 what would likely become an argument.

38 The next morning Ignavus awoke, and before breakfast, went out beyond his porch to sit on the fence near his  
39 property line, as he did each morning, watching the dawn and taking stock of the tasks to be done that day.

40 After some effort, Ignavus dismounted from his perch and made his way to the barn  
41 to check on Saoirse's work from the night before. Upon entering the barn, he heard  
42 the horses in the back of the stable rustling, and went to investigate. Huddled in the  
43 corner of one of the empty stables, Ignavus discovered a man and woman, and two  
44 small children, all looking up at him with a hunted countenance.

45 "Who are you?" Ignavus demanded.

46 Just as the man was about to hazard an answer, Saoirse ran into the barn.

47 "Father!" She said in a pleading voice.

48 "Who do these slaves belong to?" Ignavus said angrily.

49 Saoirse paused in search of an answer, then blurted out, "They're Aunt Hope's!"

50 "What do you mean they're Aunt Hope's, she doesn't have any slaves?"

51 Ignavus' scornful gaze upon his daughter was slowly being met with the same kind of  
52 indignance he saw in her last night at the dinner table.

53 "What have you done?... What has Hope done? Ignavus said, fearing the  
54 worst.

55 "They weren't supposed to be here. They were supposed to be at Aunt Hope's."

56 Ignavus walked towards the back of the stable where the man, woman, and two children sat, looking at the four of  
57 them. They had appeared to be listening intently to the discussion, frightfully unaware of their fate. As Ignavus was  
58 studying the contents of the stable, he heard Hope's voice.

59 "Saoirse, we have to hurry! They'll be late!" Hope said, running into the barn, out of breath.

60 As Hope approached Saoirse, she discovered a look of caution on Saoirse's face, and just beyond it, saw Ignavus' as  
61 he slowly walked towards the both of them.

62 "Who do these slaves belong to, Hope?" Ignavus asked. "They need to be returned immediately."

63 "They don't belong to anyone, Ignavus," Hope said defiantly.

64 "You have no right to get my family involved in your crimes. I have to report what you have done to the  
65 magistrate," he threatened.

66 "Ignavus, I'm sorry I had to bring them here, but you can't report me to the magistrate. They'll arrest all of  
67 us. Can't you just leave this be. They'll be gone by nightfall," Hope pleaded

68 Ignavus looked back at the stable, then at his daughter, took a deep breath, taking stock of the sound of horses  
69 eating their hay and the occasional shuffle of hooves on the barn floor. After a long silence, he started for the  
70 door, walking past Hope without so much as a glancing acknowledgment of her presence, and made his way back  
71 to the fence, and stood with his back propped against it, facing the road, watching the morning sun, and thought  
72 to himself "winter's coming."

~ FIN ~

**Answer the following in 1 paragraph in your Notebook:**

**During the Underground Railroad, people found to be aiding in the freeing of slaves could be heavily fined or sent to prison. You are a farmer in Wisconsin in 1853 and you discover several runaway slaves hiding in your barn. What action would you have taken, and why?**

#### Historical References

**Free Soilers** – political party that opposed slavery in the Western territories

**Whigs** – political party that emerged in opposition to Andrew Jackson; opposed slavery; supported the American System

**Ed Holton** – ran for governor during the 1853 Wisconsin election for the Free Soil party

**Barstow** – William A. Barstow won the 1853 election for Wisconsin governor for the Democratic Party; and later supported Stephen A. Douglas