

The Adventures of George Wesner

CHAPTER I.

Synopsis of preceding chapters.

Five years before the outbreak of the Civil War, love of adventure, hatred of slavery and the desire to help his friend, George Wesner led me, Charles Bradley, a civil engineer of Attakapas County, Louisiana, to become an agent of the underground railroad. Wesner had been nursed through the smallpox by a young slave, Lucy, belonging to the Coverley plantation. He discovered facts which proved that Lucy was white and of good family. A second match followed, which progressed so well until Coverley proposed to sell Lucy to his son and refused to sell her to anyone else. Wesner became desperate and he helped her steal Lucy, and went to New York to arrange with the anti-slavery society for the care of any slaves we could bring North.

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CHAPTER III.

The next day was the Sabbath, both it and Monday passed, and I had received no news from Mr. Greedy.

Tuesday afternoon I found a note at the hotel clerk's office, requesting me to remain in my room from 10 o'clock until 8 that evening.

I waited impatiently for the hour to come, and about 7:45 the waiter brought up the card of Mr. Stephens.

He was a thick-headed fellow, and said that Mr. Entwistle wished to see me at his office, and requested me to accompany him. I inquired who Mr. Entwistle was. He replied that he did not know him, though he knew where the office was; that he (Stephens) was a pressman in the Tribune office, and was sent by Mr. Greedy. I, therefore, concluded that he was all right, and followed him to the place of meeting, not, however, without some suspicion.

He took me to the back office of a building situated on a little court, a few steps from Broadway. I have forgotten the street, as I was out there once.

In that office I met Horace Greeley, Gerrit Smith, a member of Congress from the State of New York (whose name I will not mention, as he is still living), and a gentleman whom they introduced as Mr. Samuel Entwistle.

After that night's interview, it was Mr. Entwistle with whom I chiefly dealt. From words inadvertently spoken and allusions made, I do not think that it was his real name, but all checks and drafts were drawn and signed or indorsed by Samuel Entwistle.

Later in the evening another gentleman made his appearance. This was Mr. Birney, of Philadelphia, a former abolition candidate for President. Mr. Greeley briefly stated to the other gentlemen my proposition and called upon me to explain it, which I did, recapitulating to them all the reader knows, and fully explaining my views.

The proposition advanced by me and accepted by them was:

For every negro man or woman delivered to the agent of the underground railroad at any point in Indiana, Illinois, Ohio or any other free state, where they could be best delivered, we were to receive a sum of \$300, and for all children less than 6 years of age \$100, and over 6 years to cover as men or women, a sum sufficient to cover all expenses was to be paid by sight drafts, drawn by myself upon some financial agent of the Anti-Slavery Society at New York. On the report of the agent who received the fugitives being deemed sufficient voucher that our part was fulfilled.

The Anti-Slavery Society was also to pay for such material and outfit as I then wanted to enable us to begin operations, which would amount to about \$1500. Some hesitancy being shown on their part regarding this item, I said that I would furnish the money myself, leaving them the receipts bills and drawing for the amount if we were successful in our first venture.

I intended to use two avenues for transportation, one by vessel or steamer from the seaboard or the Atchafalaya River, the other across the country, via the tributaries of the Red and Arkansas Rivers, following the different bayous, rivers, swamps, and coming out on the bank of the Mississippi at my wood-yard. Here we could keep a party of 100, if necessary, for months in the country around swamp and wilderness, and no person ever landed there from the river, except the deckhands of steamers calling for coal. His parents were on the bank where the wood was piled.

I explained this to them as well as my descriptive powers would allow, returned to the hotel and wrote to George Wesner to meet me at Cairo in one month from that day.

Mr. Entwistle had given me the address of a young man whom he said would assist me in getting together, and take me to the different localities, or I was a stranger in the city, and I must procure material for all my necessary outfit and something for every possible emergency.

CHAPTER IV.

What we most needed was a couple of boats or canoes capable of carrying 10 men each and built so as to be folded and put into a box or trunk, for transportation.

I already had a plan for their construction and had the drawings of an ideal boat, but whether they would develop into anything practical or not when criticized by a mechanic or on actual trial was yet to be demonstrated.

The next day I called upon Mr. Wilson and told him my plan. Together we went to a blacksmith's shop, where I showed the smith my drawings, but he was thick-headed and totally devoid of mechanical ideas, so I wasted no time with him, but went to a manufacturer of small machinery, one Matthew Colson, an Irishman, and a very ingenious man, who comprehended the idea as soon as I explained the same. I made a bargain with him to construct two canoes. These were a marvel of simplicity, strength, carrying capacity and lightness. One was 24 feet long, six feet wide at the center, about two feet deep and would carry 12 men (we have had 15 in it); the other was about 15 feet long, four feet wide, 18 inches deep and was to be used more for exploring and working.

When the boats were completed, we carried the box containing them to the river bank, opened it, and in just 20 minutes I stepped into the canoe, ready for use and floating upon the bosom of the Hudson, undeniably a perfect success.

A crowd of boys and men lined the river bank, gazing and watching our movements and making comments. I called two or three to step in and try the new boat. Three of the boys did so, and I paddled out perhaps a half mile and back again. "Now," gentlemen, said I, "I have a great curiosity to try the capacity of my boat, and would like to have a few of you step in. I will promise not to drown you."

I held her well up to the bank until 15 men and half-grown boys were seated on her thwarts, and then she off. She floated handsomely, with her gunwale at least 10 inches out.

This was better than I expected. We paddled around for perhaps 15 minutes, landed, hoisted our boat on the shore,

went to the hotel for our dinner, returned and started down the river in the canoe, arriving at New York—yes, at Colson's shop, to my friend, George Wesner.

I was well satisfied.

CHAPTER V.

It was now about time to expect Wesner at Cairo, and I was obliged to remain at least 10 days longer in New York. I wrote to him to continue his journey to New York.

At the expiration of a week George Wesner one evening walked into the Astor House. I was glad enough to see him, as I had already another project in my mind, and this was to buy a small stock of general goods and open a store near the Wesner plantation, a very good location, and the store would have a tendency to help our scheme, extend our acquaintance and bring us into more immediate contact with the free negroes in our district.

The purchase of these goods took somewhat longer than we expected, and it was the last of November before we were back in Cairo. Our boats were packed in two boxes, maced for Bradley's yard, Arkansas. One box contained both boat frames, paddles to suit and a few other little tools, the whole weighing a trifle over 50 pounds. The other contained the covers, and weighed about 20 pounds.

Boats and utensils weighed less than 20 pounds. We had several coils of rope, rigging and line rope, and had also provided ourselves with small tools. No duck, simply a fly—with no walls or ends. This was similar to one already owned by me and used with a surveying instrument. It was made in Cairo, on December 10, 1835, when I landed at the wood-yard. Standing beside the boxes I watched by partner on the deck of the steaming vessel, as she swept down the muddy Mississippi, and I saw a realizing sense of the work I had undertaken began to stare me in the face.

It is well known that back some miles from the mouth of the Red and Arkansas Rivers make a water course almost parallel to the former river.

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started. You perhaps may have a little philanthropy or some sentimental feeling about this thing, I haven't; with me it is business, nothing else.

"I confess that I am not quite so practical as yourself, Moore, but really I have no particular love for the master, nor respect for the system. You and I are practical abolitionists, or will be."

"Yes, it does lead to about that," Moore answered, "but it isn't exactly the way I was raised," and in a few minutes we were fast asleep.

Next morning at daybreak we were up and moving, and by the time it was light enough to see plainly, were at work both of us were quite experienced woodmen and made pretty fair progress. All we did was to cut off the dead limbs and clear out the brush, to form a trail passable for foot passengers and plain to be seen by people not well versed in woodcraft.

In three days we had accomplished our purpose and had a path sufficiently wide for the transportation of our canoes and such other material as we intended to move, and were pretty well fatigued when we returned to the wood-yard. We unpacked our canoes, taking them apart, to enable us to pack them on the back of a mule, and this by the aid of an improved saw we accomplished satisfactorily.

Monday we started, and at 9 o'clock both canoes were on the banks of Baker Creek, put together and ready to launch. At 5 P. M. we were back with our mule.

The next morning, putting on the hands in charge of the yard while Moore was absent, we started, mule and all, and by 4 o'clock were at the creek again. We built a pen a few yards square and penned

the mule, leaving him a supply of hay for three days, and as one side of the pen was on the water front, he need not go thirsty.

At daylight the next morning we were up, and by 8 o'clock were off. Taking the right bank, we entered the swamp, and pushed quietly across the little pond, or outlet, forced our way through the overhanging branches, and in less than an hour were on the waters of the creek.

We ran down, not over two miles, disembarked, and prepared to carry the large canoe across to Big Creek. The next two days we spent in clearing the road. The third day, we succeeded in getting our large canoe through, but were obliged to take it apart and make two trips, one with the frame, and one with the canoe cover.

In three days more we had our large canoe safely hidden four miles from the mouth of the White River. Moore was on board a steamer bound for Bradley's yard, and I was on my way to New Orleans, the thing in our undertaking was secured, viz., a safe and secret route from the mouth of the White River to our yard.

The navigation of the Teche and Texas was not easily procured boats; but the manner of crossing from the point where we would leave the Texas to our big canoe was yet to be provided for. In this we wanted a man who must have George Wesner's help.

Ten days from the time I left the mouth of the White River I was on board the little steamer St. Mary, bound up the bayou Teche from Brashear City.

The next morning I was at Wesner's plantation. George had been at home nearly two weeks, and had a small building for a store well under way. It would take two weeks' time to complete the building ready for occupancy.

Throughout the Attakapas country, the plantations were large, the prairies rolling, and timber scattering. Our work must be night work and the dark swamps our refuge. We must find a location at once, secure from the visits of the coon hunter or his prowling hound. We selected a large swamp some distance from the Teche. A small creek made up into it. The land along its banks was low, and the country for miles around was covered with its stagnant overflow. Twisted cypress, gnarled oaks and pecans grew in luxuriance and the undergrowth was black and dense. In this swamp, upon a small hummock, we located our depot, rendezvous, the only oasis in this noxious wilderness.

Across the wide stretch of prairie, but a mile or so from the outer edge, was the main traveled road to Opelousas and the northern parishes.

A narrow but unfrequented road skirted the edge of the swamp. Between the two roads were, scattered patches of timber, and through this were bridle and cattle paths. A few miles above the point where the White River entered the Mississippi there was a chute leading into the Attakapas; this chute we determined to use, as it was near the hiding place of our big canoe. From the Teche to this point it was necessary to explore and locate a route by water, practicable for our use, and also to establish safe places for our encampment.

An our traveling through by night, we must have secure hiding places by day, and know where to find them. Now was the time to locate these while we were yet guests. With a party of fugitives,

and the pursuer following there would be little time for deliberating or changing route.

One bright December morning we started for the swamp communicating with the Bayou looking out for his duck snare.

George bantled him to sell the old trap. "No, massa, don't like to—seems too much like selling an old friend; dis yer boat an me has been together for lots of years; can't sell her 'thout a pow'r of monee'."

"Well, daddy," replied George, "how much do you call 'pow'r of monee'?"

"Speks free dollars," answered the old man, "and transferred our selves to the canoe, which we decided was better than borrowing Gilroy's, as we intended."

By 7 o'clock on a dark night it is a lonesome place for navigation. Now and then on its banks could be seen the buildings of a planter; these we must have hidden only by the friendly shades of night.

On our way we made careful note of location as we slowly paddled up the stream. Every rod of shore was carefully scrutinized, although both of us had been up the Texas as far as Moses Landing, never before had we cause for such eager interest.

When there was a growth of oaks or of other hard wood, the frosts of December had seared their leaves, and although clinging to the boughs, the eyes could distinguish some distance between the shriveled foliage. Above us was the clear, blue sky of Louisiana, the shadows of the passing clouds reflecting upon the glassy black waters of the bayou.

Here was a plantation and we turned into the mouth of a diminutive chute, scarcely three yards wide and nearly invisible from the stream.

How sudden the change! The tangled vines shut out the sun's light as we pushed our canoe through the gloomy water.

Here was the swamp! The chill, malarial vapors filled the air, heavy, dense and thick. Down through the tangled foliage straggled rays of light, gleamed and shimmered on the dark surface of the chute and lost themselves in the dense growth that lined its banks. Alligators clustered around every spot of sunlight, eager to enjoy the last rays before retiring for their short winter nap.

We pushed our canoe 10 miles before we again came out to the Texas swamp-light. Although there were four feet of water on the chute where the waters united with the Texas, we had to throw ourselves flat in the canoe to avoid the over-

hanging bushes. From the Texas its opening was barely distinguishable.

Right here was a secure camping and hiding place, we marked the spot and pushed on.

The outlet below we had also marked by placing a buoy some 10 rods below the opening.

No one has any idea of the intricacies of these waterways beyond the levees unless he makes an attempt to navigate them. Often did we wander up some self-defined course, to find it end in an impassable swamp.

Bye-and-bye of Glace and Bouef were disturbed by our canoe, and it was nearly four weeks before we arrived at Moses Landing, near which point we determined to strike for the Arkansas River.

Bypaths by day and secure roads by night—we must have. There was the Red River to cross, portages to make and men to avoid everywhere. I kept an accurate map of the way. The last of January found us across the Arkansas and awoke up Moore, a silent man usually, but this evening he was quite talkative.

"Gentlemen," said he, "we have our railroad, and this is no doubt a fine case of accident, the engineer and conductor will be likely to go under; as for the passengers, the extent of their injuries would be a sound blessing. If we succeed, we have a gold mine; if we hang, unless we are lucky enough to escape."

"This we knew, and that night felt pretty sober over it. Moore's argument of reasoning were close and plausible. No one would suspect negroes of attempting to escape to the North from a place so far removed as Attakapas; the chances of recovery there would be to search some neighborhood and the swamps roundabout, for usually when they did run away, they were their refuge for a few weeks. When starved out they would return to their old homes, sadder, wiser and much hungrier and dirtier than before. After their escape, the Underwood family would crawl into some old ginhouse and lay there until the first smart was over, then sturdily return to their work."

On the contrary, the escaping negro to death or capture. A white man caught near their quarters must explain his business pretty convincingly. There would be no excuse for a white man's case into their hands, would escort him across the border, the chances being that he would die en route. For these reasons we agreed with Moore that we would conduct our operations the better.

The next day, bidding Moore farewell, we commenced the return trip to Attakapas, and in a few days were on our way North. On arriving, we found the store finished. It was a small wooden building, about 20 feet wide by 40 long, with a shed attached, which we began to unpack our goods. There were one or two boxes, the covers of which we did not display on our counters. These contained various disguises—stains

for the skin, false hair, wigs and complete paraphernalia for different costumes. Coffee, raw tea, shaved our faces smooth, to be better prepared.

The goods unpacked, we had our opening and trade commenced. Business was good.

CHAPTER VII.

One day I was busy trying to trade with an Acadian for a couple of bales of cotton, when with a wild whoop a chap called Skew Bill Snelder dashed up to the door. Skew Bill was a character. An unlucky fellow received when a child had twisted his nose so that it stood at an angle of 45 deg. with his face.

Skew Bill believed himself to be a celebrated negro-hunter, although to my knowledge he never caught or found one. We called him one or two instances on record where it was proved by court that he had been quite successful in finding other people's mules, but these mules were arranged by the Sheriff, and, contrary to the wishes of the general public, Snelder had as yet escaped the rope.

A dozen or more dogs followed at his heels—bound, cur, bull and mongrel, none of them to listen to his brag, but could smell a nigger a mile away.

"Brad!" he yelled, "Brad!" Recognizing his peculiar voice, I went to the door.

"There's 'b-1 to pay at Coverly's. I've got the best job I've had for 10 years."

"What is it, Skew? What is it?"

"Oh, a dozen of the old man's best hands have took to the swamp, and all his dogs was plensed."

"Sure?" I asked.

"Well, I reckon it must be—niggers is gone, the dogs is dead, and about a dozen mules gone, too—something up!"

My heart stood still, and it seemed as if I should suffocate before I could breathe again. Wesner had been gone two days, and, unknown to me, had set the ball rolling. There was no turning back now. I had not suspected that he contemplated the step so soon, as he had said nothing to me about it.

"Say, you haven't heard 'em go by your place, have you?" cried Snelder.

"Of course not; if I had I would have stopped them here."

"You can't track 'em by the mules, for they're not shod, and all mules and niggers goes barefoot in this country," says Bill.

"Do you know who they are?"

"No; the old man just sent for me."

"Tell him I will come over, Bill, and I'll look the hunt with you."

"All right; you're a good one. Bring Terror, my dog, with you."

"I'll be there without fail, and leave George here to tend store."

He was business enough for one day. Where Wesner was I did not know, but I surmised that his absence was connected with the stampedede of Coverly's negroes, and I longed for news, knowing pretty well that he would not leave the swamps by daylight. I did not more than half believe that he was with the runaway.

George usually rode a small Creole pony of perhaps 800 pounds weight, but he owned a magnificent stallion, black as night, and the swiftest runner in all Southwestern Louisiana.

After my customers were gone I went over to the stables where George kept his saddle-horse. Kitty was there, and I longed for his absence, and in fact, I was business enough for one day. Where Wesner was I did not know, but I surmised that his absence was connected with the stampedede of Coverly's negroes, and I longed for news, knowing pretty well that he would not leave the swamps by daylight. I did not more than half believe that he was with the runaway.

I was on a public highway but seldom used, and it was true, yet some benighted individual might come that way. I started into a sharp run and kept a short distance ahead of the party, straining my eyes in my vain endeavor to pierce the dense thicket. About 4 o'clock that afternoon, I gathered her poor little kit of clothes and called around her those of the slaves whom she could trust. Giving her directions as to proceed to the swamp, as I had to procure my own disguise.

visions enough to last 10 persons three months, at our depot. We had hard bread, coffee, raw tea, dried apples, pork, pork, fish and dried apples. There were also a few boxes of canned fresh meats to use in case of sickness, as well as flour and meal in small quantities.

We had a rough log house built to shelter them, intending to make our first party build suitable quarters for our refuge, for we might be compelled to stay there weeks and perhaps months, though we did not intend to stop but a day or two, just long enough to let the runaway get well away.

I thought these things over as I moved about the store that afternoon, anxiously expecting George Wesner's return. I very well knew that he might have to spend three days, perhaps longer, before he could get back, and then possibly keep on with the fugitives. I thought it more than likely, however, that he would come back to the store and stay a week or two, and thus avoid even the shadow of suspicion.

"Night came and I closed the store and went home.

Next morning, about 7 o'clock, as I was sitting down to my breakfast, the door opened, and my eyes were attracted by a smile of content and triumph on his face, walked into the room.

"Brad, I thought I would breakfast with you."

"All right; sit down."

"Jane (to the waitress), get a plate and cup for Mr. Wesner." Jane disappeared. I gave George a look of inquiry.

"All right," said he, "safe and sound. I will tell you on the road. Walls have ears, and ears find tongues; we must trust no one now."

"How do you do, George?"

"Well, no, not exactly; but let us know how you managed, how did you spirit 10 darkies away from Coverly's place; why were you not discovered for business, but if you please, we will open the store and proceed to sell (by day) molasses, tea, coffee, or any other commodity which we have to our friends and neighbors while we steal their niggers by night. How's that, my boy, for a fire-eater?"

"Well, George," I said, "we only have one chance now, and that is to play the horse."

"Yes," cried George, "and no pack to draw from," a friendly allusion to draw poker, a game quite familiar in those days to many of the citizens of Louisiana, especially among the business men, who called them to travel much upon the Mississippi steamers.

"How long," I inquired, "do you propose to leave the fugitives in the swamp?"

"The longer the better, the shorter I want the excitement to subside, and the hunt in this vicinity over before I start. Not that I think there is a chance of being ever remotely suspected. I even want to join in the hunt, but if you are such a dandy of old Coverly (and I know he would sooner draw a bead on me than on a deer), that it might look suspicious for me to be hunting up his niggers. So I guess I will forego that pleasure, but wouldn't I like to see the old devil squirm, as he thinks of his dollar and neighbors who are niggers in the swamp safe as the Bank of New Orleans! Brad, old fellow, you had better go. I can have the story second-hand; that will be some comfort."

I sent Coverly word by Hannah's Pete that I would come up and join them. Skew Bill Snelder was going to try the swamp, and I agreed to go and bring Terror.

"Go, Brad—go by all means," said George.

I went, leaving my companion in the road about a mile from the store. I turned to the right up a road that led out to a small prairie, and giving my horse the rein and a touch with the spur, reached the edge of the prairie in a few moments.

These Louisiana prairies are generally of small extent, perhaps four or ten miles across, and usually bordered by a bayou or swamp, sometimes both, and often as fertile as the Garden of Eden, but half cultivated.

Before and around me lay thousands of acres of prairie, and I drank the fresh morning air as a thirsty man would pure water, as I sped away over the billowy earth.

Bulwer's Paul Clifford was uppermost in my thoughts, and I imagined George and myself a brace of modern heroes. Conscience said, "You rascals, you are but a couple of nigger-stealers!"

I had ridden perhaps two or three miles when I saw approaching me from the direction of what was then called Perry's Slough a party of horsemen. Perry's Slough was a party of horsemen, and the swamp that the slough ended in was at least 10 miles distant from where George Wesner left the road with the fugitives.

I stopped my horse and waited the approach of the party. Foremost rode Dick Coverly. I rode up to him and extended my hand, and did not think it policy to pick up Wesner's, even if I felt so inclined. Dick covered me very pleasantly.

"Good morning, Brad. What news from the runaway? Are you on the trail?"

"Yes, they are evidently in Perry's Swamp—poor fool!"

"What do you think of it?"

"Well, that's where they all go. We followed the mules, and found all of them inside of three miles from the swamp. When they get into the swamp they must have taken to the swamp."

"What do you propose to do?"

"Leave them there for a while, and then we'll go back to the store, for it is very pleasant even for a nigger to starve, as they will surely do if they stay there. The worst trouble is, it will put us out of business. Spring, so we shall be obliged to buy or hire more help. We have pretty much made up our minds to buy, then catch these and sell them. That will teach the rest of the boys in this part of the country."

I agreed fully with Dick Coverly in this matter, coming to the conclusion that as long as his money was good, our quietness was our only hold-out to steal them. I rode back to the store, the hunt being indefinitely postponed.

(To Be Continued.)

CHAPTER VIII.

George continued his story of how he carried Lucy away.

"I had given Lucy directions," he said, "to take the party as far as Keldra's place, and, if I did not overtake them, to turn off at the fork of the road, go into the woods and await my coming."

My disguise was that of a negro, black as the blackest of the darkey idiom is perfect, and I felt no fear of discovery in that character. When I spoke, old Pete cried out, "It's a strange nigger."

"I waited a minute or two until all was quiet. There were four miles to cover, and in less than three hours it would be daybreak."

"I slipped off my horse, helped Lucy to the saddle, tucked old Pete's two small children on behind, and, being the lead, started off at a dog trot. Lucy came next, while the rest followed, sometimes running, and then falling along as they stumbled over roots and fell into ruts of the road. I was in the lead, and I was crawling the last mile before we left the wood. Bradley, those were moments of intense anxiety."

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catches me or mine with one or a dozen. "However, to make an end of my story, we arrived at the swamp about 10 o'clock, rendezvous about noon. It was slow walking and tiresome."

"Brad, you should have heard their exclamations of delight at the sight of the cabins we had built. I never knew a negro had so much feeling—that is, I suppose I knew—but I never realized the fact before."

"It was known to them only as a strange nigger, and they had a notion in their heads that I was from the North. They could not conceive how I got there, but while they felt that I was one of them, they were sure they were lost without me, so after dinner when I called Macon up to me and put him in charge of the place they accepted the position without a word."

"The disguise of a negro will not do for us when we have our convey in a difficult or a dangerous position. It does not carry with it that idea of obedience we must exact of these people to get them through the perils of our swamp and night journeys. I realized it, first, and Lucy further told me that to succeed we must don our natural characters, or at least those which were least without us, so me and put him in charge of the place they accepted the position without a word."

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