Race to the Frozen North

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The Matthew Henson Story

CATHERINE JOHNSON

With illustrations by
Katie Hickey

Barrington Stoke

To Elsa, the best dog in the world, who let me stay in her house while I wrote this book

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INTRODUCTION

Matthew Henson was the first American to reach the North Pole. That was over a hundred years ago in 1909. The American government gave everyone who came home from that trip medals. They were heroes! Did I say everyone? Matthew did not get a medal like everyone else. He did not get a hero's welcome. In fact, for many years some people didn't even believe what he'd done.

Oh, he'd lived a long life, and an exciting one. He'd travelled the world and spoke many different languages. Matthew could drive a team of dogs across the ice, hunt wolves and seals and make just about anything out of wood or metal.



But when he came home to the land where he was born, the only work he could find was as a messenger boy or parking cars.

He died poor. Only his family and a few others knew about his adventures. But thirty years after he had died, people began to talk about him. They knew the stories were true and eventually he was reburied in a hero's grave. They told his story and remembered his name. Nowadays you'll find schools and colleges and even battleships named after him.

Why was he forgotten and ignored for so many years?

The reason was the colour of his skin ...



PART ONE

Running Away





CHAPTER 1

I walked out of my stepmother's house not long after my eleventh birthday. Truth was I'd have left a whole lot sooner if she hadn't beaten me so hard I couldn't get out of bed for three whole days. My stepmother was called Nellie, and she hated me. She had this stick cut from a tree out by our small fields – black oak, I think it was. It was harder than hell and had sharp points that cut into my skin. I don't know what I did to make her hate me so. All I know is that she never beat my sisters half as much as she beat me.

It was always my fault. That last time it was because I filled up the bucket too full with water from the creek. It slopped over the floor



in the kitchen. The stick came down hard on my back, arms, legs, again and again. It felt as if every bone in my body was breaking. You should have seen the bruises! My one good jacket got torn.

I had to crawl back up the stairs to my bed and I lay there shivering. It was wintertime and the heat from the fire downstairs only just made it up through the boards. I lay there and looked up at the ceiling. It hurt so bad. That was when I made my mind up to escape.

The first time, I crept downstairs when the house was dark and still, but my bare feet thumped too loud on the stairs and Nellie caught me. She shot out of her bedroom and yelled all sorts, thinking I was stealing food. As soon as I saw her reach for that stick of hers, I was back upstairs faster than a squirrel up



a tree. I lay back down in bed with my heart hammering in my chest.

I knew I couldn't stay. I had my mind set on the big city, Washington DC. Maybe somewhere there a boy like me could get a job. Had to be better than this. *I'll try again tomorrow night*, I said to myself. *And she won't hear me next time*.

I tore up my thin wool blanket into squares. I planned to tie them round my feet so no one would hear me come down the stairs.

Next morning, my sister Eliza looked hard at me. And when Nellie sent us out to cut wood, Eliza told me she'd seen the blanket all cut up. She knew what I'd done that for.

"I have to go," I told her. "Next time Nellie could break my legs."



When we were out of sight of the house, Eliza hugged me tight. "I know, Matt," she whispered. "I thought she'd kill you last time … But I'll miss you so bad."

I nodded. "I'll miss you too. But I can't stay here any longer."

"You going to the city?" Eliza said. "Washington?"

I nodded again.

"Quickest way is up the road past Port Tobacco. I heard people say you can walk there in a day or two," she told me.

I wiped my face with my sleeve. I was sad to leave my sister but I didn't want her to see me cry.



"Always be polite, Matt, and be kind. You'll find work somewhere," Eliza said, and picked a bit of dust out of my hair. "Just you watch out in the city. And remember, when you walk down those big city streets, keep on the outside of the sidewalk, near the road. I heard there's monsters living in those basements. They live in the dark and swallow up coloured children who fall in. So you make sure you don't."

I made a face. "Eliza, that's all just stories," I said.

"Just stay safe, you hear?"

*

That night I stepped quiet as a polecat down the stairs and across the parlour to the front door. I opened it real slow. I held my breath but the door made no sound at all. Outside, it was dark and cold. The stars shone like bright



diamonds in a great bowl of black, with the moon hung high like a big silver dollar. The ground sparkled with frost, and my breath made great clouds of smoke in the frozen air.

I ran across the moonlit fields and all the way to the road. With every step I took, I was further away from Nellie and I felt a little bit more free. It was like the stories I'd heard of slaves escaping, and I was setting out towards freedom. I knew if Nellie caught me, she'd drag me back and beat me until she broke my arms and legs.

I could feel the cold crisp frost through the blanket squares around my feet, but I kept running. When I could run no more, I stepped off the road and into the woods. I pushed some dead leaves out of the way and curled up in a hollow at the bottom of a tree. I held my jacket tight shut to keep out the chill, but I



couldn't sleep, not a wink. I was too cold and too scared. I thought of all those stories I'd heard of night-riders. My father used to tell me how they'd come galloping through the dark, hunting down coloured folk. They carried flaming torches and their cloaks flowed out behind them. They would shoot you or hang you from a tree just for talking to a white person. Or maybe my cruel stepmother would come hunting me through the woods with her black oak stick in her hand.

As soon as it was light, I set off again. I stayed close to the trees and as I walked I clapped my arms against my side and tried to think of good things. I thought about the times when my daddy let us play with the dog next door. Or when he'd dig a pit and fill it with fire and we'd roast corn cobs and sweet potatoes too hot to hold.



I shut my eyes and remembered how warm the food was and how the potatoes were sweet in my mouth. I was very hungry.

Washington will be full of stalls stacked high with oven-hot corn cobs or roast nuts or apple pie, I thought. Then I remembered I didn't have a nickel. Not one cent.

But I couldn't stop now. *A big city like Washington DC?* I said to myself. *There'll be nickels and cents just dropped in the street, maybe dimes even.* After all, didn't the president of the whole of our country live there?

*

I was at the edge of the city by the afternoon. Could smell it a mile off – a thousand chimneys or more smoking with a thousand wood fires. I could see it too – lamps lit in the buildings and



on street corners. I wished I could tell someone what I was seeing – more buildings than I'd ever seen in my whole life, all squeezed up together, and bright yellow gaslight to make the night seem like day. I walked past houses all stuck together in rows with not a bit of grass to be seen. And I saw the basements Eliza told me about, with dark steps leading down into the dark under the houses.

I rushed on even though my feet were sore and I was so hungry my insides hurt.

I stopped outside a house, out of breath, bent double. I heard the door open and a woman cussed at me and told me to get off her property.

Then I found an alley by the side of a church and hunkered down in the doorway. I hugged myself to keep warm. The ground was hard, but I shut my eyes tight and thought



about the summer so as to keep me warm. I was almost asleep when something dug sharp into my side.

"Get out of it, boy!" A policeman stood over me. He must have kicked me in the ribs. I couldn't see his face, because it was dark. But I could see he was swinging a stick, and it was thicker than my stepmother's.

"Did you hear me, boy?" He kicked out at me again and I got up, even though I was still in pain, and ran.

I nearly ran straight down into one of them basements there and then. What would be worse? If I was eaten alive, at least I wouldn't be cold and hungry any more. I leaned over the railings and looked down. It was so dark I couldn't see a thing. Eliza had been right, I thought. There could be anything down there. The steps could take me straight to hell.



Then I jumped a mile. Something moved. Was it a monster? Suddenly a crack of light opened up – a door, not hell! And a man looked up at me. My mouth must have fallen open and I froze solid. He came up those steps and I saw then he had a shovel. I expected him to swipe me hard with it and send me back to Nellie.

"You stealing something, boy?" His voice was a deep growl. Maybe he was a monster in a man's shape.

"No, sir. Never." I pulled my jacket round me and tried to stand up straight. My feet were so wet and cold they hurt like fire.

He looked at me, up and down, and shook his head.

"You a runaway?"



I looked away. I didn't want to answer. I started to hobble down the street.

He shouted out to me. "Get yourself to Janey's Cafe. Take a left and it's two blocks from here. If you're hungry, she might help. Can't promise ..."

I turned to say thank you but the man had vanished and I was alone in the cold street. What if he really was a monster sending me to my death? But my feet hurt all the way up my legs and I could feel my hunger fierce inside me. I had nothing much to lose. So I hobbled left, counted two blocks and found a street with old houses and shut-up shops. Which one was Janey's? Some of the houses had signs, but I didn't know my letters other than M for Matt and E for Eliza. And away from the street corner the gaslight was dull and I couldn't see a thing.



But I could smell and I reckoned I could smell food. So I followed the smell and curled up on the wooden step of a shut-up, beat-up old house.

I was so tired but I couldn't sleep. I was so cold my teeth rattled in my head. Somewhere I heard a dog bark and a baby cry. Then on a road a way off I heard the sound of a horse and cart, and I drifted off to sleep as the hoof beats clip-clopped into the distance.

