

Following the Drinking Gourd

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I'm here to tell you a story. It's a true story. It's a story about slavery. A story about escape to a safe land. The story is about the courage it takes to leave everything you know, no matter how brutal your life is. It's the courage to change everything about your life and to travel into the unknown, knowing how easily you can be captured and killed. 3500 years ago, the Hebrew slaves left Egypt and traveled to freedom in Canaan. In our country, before the Civil War, many slaves in the South fled their masters and traveled along The Underground Railroad to Canada, where they would be safe. This story is about a family who took this journey. They used a map song, Follow the Drinking Gourd, which was another name for the Big Dipper.

Singing: Follow the drinking gourd. Follow the drinking gourd. For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom if you follow the drinking gourd.

Now, on to our story.....

Long ago, before the Civil War, there was an old sailor called Peg leg Joe who did what he could to help free the slaves.

Joe had a plan. He'd use hammer and nail and saw and work for the master, the man who owned slaves on the cotton plantation.

Joe had a plan. At night when work was done, he'd teach the slaves a song that secretly told the way to freedom. Just follow the drinking gourd, it said.

When the song was learned and sung all day, Peg Leg Joe would slip away to work for another master and teach the song again.

One day a slave called Molly saw her man James sold to another master. James would be taken away, their family torn apart. Just one more night together.

A quail called in the trees that night. Molly and James remembered Joe's song. They sang it low:

Singing: Follow the drinking gourd. Follow the drinking gourd. For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom if you follow the drinking gourd.

When the sun comes back, and the first quail calls, follow the drinking gourd.

They looked to the sky and saw the stars. Taking their little son Isaiah, old Hattie, and her grandson George, Molly and James set out for freedom that very night.

They ran through the fields, till they crossed the stream to the woods. When daylight came, they hid in the trees, watching, listening for the master's hounds set loose to find them.

At night they walked again, singing Joe's song, and looking for the signs that marked the trail.

Singing: Follow the drinking gourd. Follow the drinking gourd. For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom if you follow the drinking gourd.

The riverbank makes a very good road, The dead trees will show you the way. Left foot, peg foot, traveling on, Follow the drinking gourd.

Walking by night, sleeping by day, for weeks they traveled on. Sometimes berries to pick and corn to snatch, sometimes fish to catch, sometimes empty bellies to sleep on. Sometimes no stars to guide the way.

One day as they hid in a thicket, a boy from a farm found them. In a bag of feed for the hogs in the wood he brought bacon and corn bread to share. Singing low, they traveled on.

Singing: Follow the drinking gourd. Follow the drinking gourd. For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom if you follow the drinking gourd.

The river ends between two hills, Follow the drinking gourd. There's another river on the other side. Follow the drinking gourd.

On and on they followed the trail to the river's end. From the top of the hill they saw the new path, another river beneath the stars to lead them to freedom. The song was almost done.

Singing: Follow the drinking gourd. Follow the drinking gourd. For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom if you follow the drinking gourd.

When the great big river meets the little river, Follow the drinking gourd.

Then they climbed the last hill. Down below was Peg Leg Joe waiting at the wide Ohio River. Molly and James and Isaiah, old Hattie and George ran to the shore.

Under a starry sky Joe rowed them across the wide Ohio River. He told them of hiding places where they would be safe. A path of houses stretched like a train on a secret track leading north to Canada. He called the Underground Railroad.

The first safe house stood on a hill. The lamp was lit, which meant it was safe to come. Ragged and weary, they waited while Joe signaled low, with a hoot like an owl. The door opened wide to welcome them.

They rushed through the house to the barn. A trapdoor in the floor took them under the barn, to hide until it was safe to move on. With danger still near, too close for ease, the farmer sent the five travelers on. He drew a map that showed the way north on the midnight road to the next safe house, just over two hills.

This time James called the signal, a hoot like an owl, that opened the door to a Quaker farm. The travelers were led to a secret room hidden behind the shelves.

When they were strong, they traveled again from house to house. Sometimes they traveled on foot, sometimes by cart. The wagon they rode near their journey's end carried fruit to market and the runaways to freedom.

At last they came to the shores of Lake Erie. Molly and James, old Hattie and young George, climbed aboard the steamship that would carry them across to Canada, to freedom. *Five more souls are safe!*, old Hattie cried. The sun shone bright when they stepped on land. They had followed the drinking gourd.

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Script adapted from Follow the Drinking Gourd by Jeanette Winter