

## **OLD FIRE EYES**

**by Kathleen Valle**

**RUN!**

It was early spring in the year 1806 and still unusually cold for Virginia plantation country. After sitting at his master's bedside for most of four days, thirteen-year-old Benjamin had fallen asleep in the warmth of the sun streaming through the rippled glass window. Laid up far too early in life, even for an old man, Master Jeffries rested stone-cold still in his large, hand-carved, four poster bed. Jeffries' good friend, Doc Graves, had come and gone many times, rubbing his scratchy whiskers, and tut-tutting helplessly. The two old men had shared whispers and secret looks when they thought Ben wouldn't notice. But the young slave boy caught and understood their secret glances, and he knew this beloved old man lying quietly in his bed wouldn't last many days before an illness like pneumonia would finish the job that Jeffries' startled horse had started. There was no cure for a broken back.

Unable to move his arms and legs and struggling for enough breath to whisper last secrets to the young black boy seated at his bedside, Jeffries had rushed to tell Ben of amazing plans he had made for him and for all the other slaves living on the plantation. Between fits of secret-telling, the old man drifted off to an exhausted sleep, eventually regaining enough strength from each nap to continue. Ben had used that precious time to digest and comprehend the wave upon wave of shocking facts that his old master hastily announced. Lack of sleep had finally caught up with Ben, however, and his efforts to stay awake and make sense of all Jeffries' secrets had failed during his master's last, lengthy nap.

A bright light awoke Ben. Something shiny outside had glinted in the sun, causing a dazzling reflection to bounce off a glass-covered picture hanging on Master Jeffries' bedroom wall. He arose quickly and looked outside, catching a hint of movement in the piney woods which stood between the river and the big plantation house. When he returned his gaze to Jeffries, the old man was awake and following Ben with his eyes. Ben sat back down quickly, hoping that his master hadn't known he was sleeping a moment before, but the faint, loving smile on Jeffries' face told him he was caught. The twinkle in the old man's eyes would have normally introduced a stream of soft chuckles, if Jeffries had been healthy and whole. As it was, that gentle smile would have to do.

The look turned serious and hinted at urgency. "Ben," Jeffries gasped. "There's more to tell and not much time. Important papers under my desk. Three loose floorboards. Pull them up. A strongbox set in stone down below. Key around my neck. Take it now. You are my son, Ben. Benjamin Jeffries. I adopted you. You are free, and so is everyone else. Promise me. College. The Law. Use your education. We studied hard, didn't we all? You are enrolled at Harvard. Cambridge, Massachusetts. All arranged and paid for."

Ben's heart leapt into his throat. "Your son? But I thought . . ."

"The key, Ben. Is it still there?" the old man interrupted.

Ben studied the old, iron key strung from a worn leather thong. It had hung around Master Jeffries' neck for as long as he could remember. Now it lay in a nest of grizzled gray hairs on the old man's sunken chest. Somehow, it seemed wrong to even touch it.

"Yes," Ben answered, "it's still there."

"Now, Ben," Master Jeffries gasped. "Put it around your neck. Don't lose it."

Ben did as he was told. When the leather thong was safely around his thin neck, and Jeffries had refilled his lungs, the old man continued. "Your mama will explain. Not your blood father. Just adopted, but you are my son in my heart and on paper. Remember those trips up to Pennsylvania?"

Ben remembered them well. At one time or another, every last man, woman and child on the plantation had traveled up north to the other Jeffries place, a small farm named *Haven*, which sat a half-day's carriage ride from Philadelphia. The young man smiled briefly, recalling the first time he had passed under the beautiful wrought-iron entrance, which seemed to drip with plump clusters of iron grapes and life-like grape leaves. Already an artist in his five-year-old heart, he had fallen in love with the iron work and asked Master Jeffries to stop long enough to study it. Mistakenly reading the word wrought within the curved arch, he had asked Jeffries if they truly were about to enter Heaven.

"Had to get you all to Pennsylvania. Needed to be sure," Jeffries panted, abruptly interrupting Ben's memories of that day eight summers ago. "There's talk here about changes in the law." He closed his eyes once again as he licked his dried lips and gathered his breath. Ben

offered him sips of spring water, lifting the old man's head so he wouldn't choke. "Bad changes for black folk," Jeffries added, after wetting his parched lips with his tongue."

"Ledgers in the strong box," Jeffries continued. "Manumission papers and wages for everyone from the day they were freed. Accounts. The bank is in Boston. Calhoun will help. He knows. Trust him. Move everyone up to Haven and sell this place. 'Bound to be bad feelings around here when word gets out. My brother. Look out for him. Big trouble. Plenty of money in accounts. Not for him. Keep going forward, Ben. Promise me."

Ben was in shock. There was too much to take in, and he wasn't sure he could remember everything Jeffries told him. "I promise," he said, hoping he could keep his word. Then he realized the old man had mentioned something about a brother. "Brother?" he asked. "You have a brother? Wouldn't the law ...?"

Jeffries seemed to read his mind. "No good slaver," he interrupted, dismissing his own brother as if he didn't matter. "Say it all back to me, so I know you understand," he gasped, "but first get me another quilt. I'm cold as death."

Ben shuddered at the horrible word Jeffries chose, but he shook it off and hurried to the new wing of the big house. He slipped into the small room called the press, where all the coverlets were stored. As Ben dug through the linens for the old man's favorite winter quilt, he tried to recall in order all the shocking secrets Jeffries had told him, but the sound of soft footsteps on the back staircase interrupted his thoughts. The servants were the only ones to use the back stairs, and someone had picked a horrible time to bother the old man, who was lockstep in a race against time. Except for Ben, Doc Graves, and Tom Beadles the overseer, the only other people allowed to visit Master Jeffries were Osha, the big cook who ruled the kitchens, and Obadiah, the house man who saw to cleaning and changing the master, now that he couldn't care

for himself. The third step from the bottom always complained noisily about Osha's weight when she climbed the stairs, but Ben noticed the step remained quiet. It had to be Obadiah, he guessed, but Ben reckoned the bent and twisted old man had visited less than two hours ago to take care of the master's needs. The young man found the quilt he was looking for and hurried around the corner and into Master Jeffries' wing to try to stop Obadiah before he could enter.

But he was too late. As he moved into the doorway, he gasped. A tall stranger dressed in a fancy military suit of some kind was holding a pillow over Master Jeffries' face, trying to smother him! Ben ran into the room, nearly tripping over the dropped quilt as he rushed to stop the big man, but he was thrown against a bedroom wall by a swipe of the man's powerful arm. The wall knocked the wind out of Ben, silencing his calls for help before they could even begin. He tried to jump to his feet, but his legs had turned to willow whips. He had left his carving knife on the table next to Master Jeffries' bed. Now, it was hidden under the man's fancy hat. If he could get to it in time, maybe . . . But he was too late! The man returned the hat to his head and grabbed the knife like he had known all along that it was there. Now, it was Ben's turn to run for his life as the man rushed toward him and sliced through the back of Ben's left hand. Feeling like he was swimming through vat of molasses, Ben waded across the quilt and stumbled through the door with the man close on his heels. Desperate, the brave young man turned. He stooped to grab the edge of the quilt, yanking it as hard as his fear would permit. Sliding across the polished wooden floor, the quilt slithered out from under the stranger's feet, and he came crashing down. Without daring to look back, Ben ran down the back stairs like the devil, himself, was after him.

As he entered the downstairs hallway, he heard the man's footfall on the top step. There was no time to look for Osha or anyone else. He had to hide, and his hand was bleeding badly! He darted into the kitchen and grabbed Osha's spare apron, before leaving an intentional trail of

blood to the back door. Then he squeezed the apron against his hand and hurried across the kitchen. He thanked the Lord above for making him small as he squeezed into the kettle bin, curling up in the biggest iron kettle he could find. Then he remembered the cabinet door. The man was down the stairs and headed for the kitchen. He twisted as quietly as he could and grabbed the back of the door with his fingernails, easing it toward him until he heard the quiet click of the latch. Did the man hear it? Ben held his breath until he was seeing stars, and he tried to squelch the fear that the sound of his pounding heart would echo around in the big iron pot like a muster-day drum, announcing his whereabouts.

The man was slinking about in the kitchen, coming closer and closer to the kettle bin. He might not have fallen for the trail of blood, after all. Suddenly his steps stopped dead-still, and he seemed to be standing right on the other side of the kettle bin door. After a long silence, Ben thought he heard the kitchen door squeak, but he wasn't about to test his ears. Just as he heard steps running toward the summer kitchen outside, Osha came muttering down the hallway from the front side of the big plantation house. She had a way of giving herself orders, as she marched through her days, and Ben was thankful for her habit, because her voice had scared away the stranger. His heart sank with disappointment as he heard the third step squeak. Would the man come back to search the kitchen once more if he knew Osha had gone up the back stairway?

The cook's wails echoed through the big house. Frozen with fear and wilted by guilt for failing to save Jeffries, Ben stayed put in the kettle, listening as Osha sent Obadiah to fetch the Reverend Stiles and Doc Graves. Within minutes, the sound of hoof-beats rattled the kettle bin as the old man galloped past the outside wall which separated the lane from Ben's hiding place. The frightened young man correctly guessed that Obadiah hadn't bothered to saddle the horse, but had chosen, instead, to ride him bareback right into town.

In his misery and fear, Ben lost track of time. It seemed to him he might have been hiding in that kettle for hours, when Osha returned to the kitchen to punch down a batch of risen bread dough. Sniffing and snuffling away her sadness, she kneaded and slammed the huge wad of dough onto the sturdy oak table made by the master's own father. Figuring it was safe for the moment, Ben climbed out of the kettle bin, nearly giving Osha a heart attack in the process.

When she had regained her wits, she reached out her huge arms to hug Ben. "Oh, Benjamin, I've got some terrible, terrible news," she said.

Ben melted into the warmth and temporary safety of her embrace, but he knew he had to act quickly. He told her about the military man smothering Master Jeffries, and he showed her the cut in his hand, cringing at the way he had ruined Osha's apron with his own blood. At first, she seemed to doubt him, but then he realized she had believed every word, because she ignored the bloody apron and wordlessly returned to punching her bread dough. From the squint of her eyes, Ben knew she was considering his news and its consequences. He stilled his tongue and waited impatiently, aware that she would best know what he should do, if he allowed her time to think.

"You need to talk with Doc Graves and Reverend Stiles when they get here," she finally reasoned. "They'll know what to do about this murderer, if . . ."

But Osha's speech was ended by a gasp, and she shot Ben a wide-eyed stare. Someone was pounding on the big front door of the Jeffries mansion. It was far too soon for Obadiah to return with the two men he had been sent to fetch, and besides, no one ever used the front door. It had to be a stranger to these parts, and the timing couldn't be worse. Ben had intended to tell her about their freedom and the hidden papers, but there was no time!

“Quick,” she ordered, “climb into the apple barrel.” With more speed than Ben would have thought possible for the big woman, she scurried to the trap-door set into the kitchen floor and lifted it. She motioned Ben down the wooden steps descending into the big root cellar and ordered him to keep quiet and stay put, adding a fierce glare to make her point. It wasn’t a minute too soon. Before she had time to lower the door, the murderer marched into the kitchen like he owned the place. Ben had immediately rejected Osha’s order to hide in the apple barrel, because it was too close to the ladder. If their visitor was the murderer, he had probably come back to find Ben. The man could look right down on him from the opening in the kitchen floor. Instead, he tiptoed into the darkest corner of the root cellar and wiggled into a large bin of potatoes, working quietly to bury himself among them.

Ben’s hunch was right. The murderer was back, and he was obviously on a mission to find the only person on earth who could identify Master Jeffries’ cold-blooded killer. As he had suspected the man might do, the stranger marched right up to the rim of the opening, looking downward into the gloom as he asked angrily, “Why was the front door unmanned, Cook? I have traveled a long way and expected to be received properly. Where is the house boy?”

Osha played her role well. “I’m so sorry, Massah, but we . . .”

“Then announce me to your master yourself,” the man interrupted. “Tell him his brother has come calling.”

Ben could hear Osha’s reply clearly. Whether from real sadness or fear, her sudden sobs sounded genuine. “Oh, Massah Jeffries, Suh, my massah’s dead! He jus’ die. We got the doctor and the Reveren’ comin’ by’m’by. He been laid up wid a broke back, and he jus’ die.”

Ben could hardly believe his ears. Why was Osha talking this way? Master Jefferies would die all over again if he could hear her going on like a mistreated, uneducated slave. Osha



had spent many hours up on the third floor reading hungrily through books and ciphering with such accuracy that Master Jefferies had turned over the household bookkeeping to her. She was anything but uneducated, and she might not know it yet, but she was no longer a slave, either. She was a free black, and so was he! So was Obadiah and so were all the rest of the blacks once owned by Master Jeffries. Then, as he listened to Osha's sniveling and the stranger's pompous raving, something else struck him for the very first time. He shouldn't be saying *Master* Jeffries anymore. The old man, who had been a combination guardian angel and grandfather for as long as he could remember, was actually his legal father! Imagine that! Now, he knew why Jeffries had insisted every black on the place should only use the term, "Master," when there were strangers around. He *wasn't* their master; he was more like a secret friend helping them along on their way to freedom!

When he realized the room had become silent, he mentally scolded himself for letting his mind wander at such a dangerous time. Was he right in thinking Osha had led the man up to see his brother? If Ben was going to fulfill his promises to his father, he needed to keep his wits about him and escape this murderer, who had strutted across the huge kitchen floor like an arrogant peacock. It seemed to Ben that his best chance to escape this man's evil intentions would come from staying put, so he used the opportunity to truly bury himself in the potato bin.

As he lay still considering his best course of action, Osha returned to the kitchen. She slowly made her way down the root cellar ladder, grunting with the effort. "Ben," she whispered hoarsely, "Where are you?" She began to systematically peer into each of the big barrels which stored dried fruits and vegetables. She was inspecting the last of the barrels with her back to the nearby potato bin, when Ben finally felt she was close enough to hear him.

"S-s-s-s," he hissed as quietly as possible.

Osha jumped so hard that one foot actually left the floor. After catching her breath and muttering up some courage, she whispered hoarsely, “Ben? Is that you, or am I talking to a snake?”

“It’s me, Osha,” he whispered from the middle of the pile of potatoes. “Behind you.”

“Heaven’s sake, child, you sure have found yourself a good hidey hole! You best stay right there until I come down to get you. It might be quite a while, but you stay still, you hear? When I say it’s clear, you’ve got to run like the wind and get as far from here as you can.”

“Osha?”

Yes, child?”

“Do you believe me?”

Osha sighed sadly. “Yes, Benjamin, I *do* believe you, but you’ve got to look at facts. That murderer up there says he’s Master Jeffries’ brother, and he sure seems to know his way around the older half of the house, so he probably is. Problem is, he’s white and you’re a black slave boy. The Master was on his way to dying. Now, even if you could get past this man without being murdered, yourself, who do you think will be believed, if you go try telling your story to the authorities?” She sighed again. “No, child, you’ve got to run far and fast. That scoundrel will be looking for you to head north, so if I were you, I’d head south first, and then I’d make for the western wilderness like your tail’s on fire.”

But the big cook didn’t know Master Jeffries’ secrets. “Osha,” Ben began, before he thought better of breaking the shocking news. He had to have some quiet time to figure out on his own just what he should do. If he were caught, that evil man would see to it that his story would never be told! Changing course, he whispered fiercely, “I’m not going without my knife. Master gave it to me and told me to carve out a place for myself, and I’m not leaving without it.”

She glanced at the empty sheath hanging from his leather belt. "I'll get it, just you wait and see. Now, you be still!" Osha gathered a spare apron from one of many pegs pounded into the root cellar wall, and she filled it full of last autumn's apples before struggling back up the ladder. Deciding that the events of the last few hours were too overwhelming to consider just now, she intentionally turned her thoughts to more familiar problems. She would focus on doing her job and bake a big pan of dowdy for that murdering scoundrel and his rag-tag bunch of men, she told herself. As she wiped away streamlets of tears from her plump cheeks, she considered what she should fix for all the visitors who would undoubtedly show up within the next few weeks. Master Jeffries was truly loved by whites and slaves, alike, and rightfully so. He was an honest and kind man. Any slave could count himself fortunate to live on the Jeffries plantation. Though the whites would come a-calling at the ornately carved front door of the big house, Osha predicted that many blacks from the surrounding area would quietly appear at the kitchen door to offer sympathy to their brethren and to demonstrate their high regard for Master Jeffries.

Osha sighed, pulled a large pan from a sturdy iron nail on the wall, grabbed a paring knife, and eased herself into the big hickory rocking chair she jokingly called her throne. Carefully removing each apple from her apron, she peeled and sliced it into the pan, absent-mindedly removing the peel in one long, curling spiral, as she always did. "*I wonder,*" she thought to herself with a shudder, "*what it will be like to have a murderer for a master.*"

During the next few hours, there was a great deal of coming and going through the kitchen, and as Ben had suspected he would, the man who called himself Captain Jeffries found an excuse to carefully search the root cellar, claiming he needed to conduct an inventory, since the house would soon be filled with friends and neighbors coming to pay their last respects. The man strolled right past the potatoes, studying the pile as carefully as he had examined every other

possible hiding place. *“If he decides to stick that big sword hanging at his side into this pile of potatoes, I’m a gone sucker,”* Ben thought. Luckily, there was little room in the root cellar to draw such a lengthy weapon from its fancy metal sheath. Eventually, the man seemed to relax a bit, perhaps deciding that Ben had long-since left the plantation. As Ben listened, the man’s heavy boots shuffled up the steps and the trap door squeaked shut, enveloping the root cellar in inky darkness.

By the time Osha opened the trap door and quietly ordered Ben to come up, he climbed the root cellar steps like a gouty old man. The only movement that seemed to come naturally to him was shivering, and he was doing that so well that it worried Osha. It was late evening, and he had fallen asleep listening to the murderer hob-nob with Doc Graves and Reverend Styles at the big kitchen table, like he was already the new owner of the plantation. Well, Ben guessed, he *was* the new owner, until Ben could prove otherwise. He had to get at those papers and hurry to Mr. Calhoun’s office to tell him what had happened. Calhoun was a good lawyer and a best friend to Jeffries, and he would see to it that justice was served.

Clucking away about how what Ben really needed was a stout bowl of the stew that bubbled away in the kitchen fireplace but how there wasn’t any time for such a luxury, Osha handed him a large kerchief filled with enough food to get him started. She also gave him three coins to use when he was desperate but not before. Finally, with a flourish, she handed him his beloved carving knife, which he quickly returned to the beautiful, hand-tooled leather sheath that always hung from his belt.

“I took it right out from under his nose,” she whispered with a proud grin. “Grabbed it and said I’d been looking all over for my favorite knife. Now you’ve got to run like the wind.

Don't even stop to say good-bye to your mama. It isn't safe. Captain Jeffries has men posted around this place, and I think they're watching for you, so keep to the shadows."

"First I've got to go to Master's office," Ben insisted.

Osha grabbed him by his belt. "No! He's in there, and he's already going through Master's books, the scoundrel!" she hissed. "Run, Ben! If he catches you, our hearts will break all over again!"

Ben had no choice. According to Master Jeffries, not even Mr. Calhoun knew where the will and manumission papers were hidden. With luck, Captain Jeffries wouldn't know about that secret hiding place, either, because it was under the new half of the house. For now, it made sense to get to Mr. Calhoun's office and tell him everything.

"Osha," Ben whispered, "Do you know how to get down into the old tunnel that leads to the river?"

"Of course I do, child, but so does the captain, I'd venture to say. It's in the old part of the house, and he grew up here, you know. I've been outside a few times, and it looks like the captain has men watching the doors, just in case you're still hiding inside. He's too smart and sneaky not to have posted someone at the tunnel opening. You just forget about that and do as I say."

She steered him away from the back door and led him to the first-floor linen press, where there was a window hidden from view by their master's pride and joy, three big lilac bushes, brought straight from Middlesex, England, many years before. Ben crawled through the opened window, and Osha closed it quietly behind him. As he crouched there, breathing in the wonderful fragrance of the blue blossoms, Ben waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Osha was wise to lead him to the window. He could see strange men watching both the front and the back doors,

acting disinterested as they waited for him to come out of the house. He stared longingly at the deeply shadowed piney woods that lay just beyond an open stretch of carefully manicured lawn. Ben thought to himself that he might be looking toward the very spot where the sun had glinted on something this morning. Now, he knew it was likely that the shiny thing had been a piece of polished brass on the captain's uniform, as he sneaked toward the house to murder his own brother! *Was that only this morning?* It seemed days ago. From the moment the bright light had awakened him, his life had changed course forever. He could waste time wishing it had all been a bad dream, but there was no need for that. This tragedy was real, all right.

The guards all turned suddenly toward the back door, and Osha stepped out to throw a large pan of water onto the ground, barely missing the boots of one of the guards.

"Oh! I'ze so sorry, Massah!" she exclaimed loudly. "I be seein' po'ly in de dawk de las' few years." She stepped boldly toward the man, continuing to hold the attention of all the guards nearest Ben's hiding place. "Lemme dry dem boots, suh," she whined.

Offering a silent prayer of thanksgiving for his big, brave guardian angel, Ben slipped unseen across the lawn and melted into the shadows of the piney woods. Osha kept up her act loudly enough to cover any sound he might have made while hurrying away. When he judged they could no longer hear his movements, he set out quickly to notify Mr. Calhoun of the day's events. The young black boy avoided the roads and stuck to the river, noticing that the mosquitoes had chosen the same vicinity. When he was sure no one was around to hear, he allowed himself to slap at the blood-thirsty creatures, but enough of them had enjoyed his momentary ceasefires that he was dancing with The Itch by the time he emerged from the woods behind Mr. Calhoun's simple frame home on Main Street. He stopped dead in his tracks, however, because two more strangers were posted by the aging lawyer's house. One more

second out in the moonlight, and they'd have seen him! He ducked back into the deep woods, where he was greeted by a fresh horde of biters. Frantic, he melted backward into the deep shadows and silently waded into the cold river, feeling more relief with each step he took into the deepening water. Willing his teeth to stop their chattering, he allowed himself a few minutes to float silently, until he found himself under the old stone bridge that spanned Main Street.

The nearly full moon was high in the sky, but its light was slanted just enough to cast shadows onto the water over the spot where Ben lay partially submerged. He took a few precious minutes to calm himself and consider his next course of action, but the moment he invited in the calm, his grief came along for the ride, and he struggled not to sob. Today he had both gained and lost a father. He had loved gentle old Charles Jeffries with all the love he supposed a real son would have for his real father, and now, before they had even begun to openly enjoy that love, the old man was gone. He had also gained and probably lost a great deal of property and a chance to tell all his people at the Jeffries plantation of their freedom. He owed so much good news to so many people who weren't even aware of their wonderful circumstances, but he could see no way to get around Captain Jeffries.

As if thinking of the man had conjured him up, he heard a now-familiar voice. The bluster from the man's kitchen table speeches had left, but Ben was certain the voice floating quietly from above him belonged to the captain. When four men neared the far side of the bridge and he saw their silhouettes on the water, his artist's eye carefully studied the shadow of the villain standing above him, from the jut of his ears to the strange bump on his nose. Ben suspected that nose had been broken more than once, from the look of it. As he lay in the water, he vowed to carve the man's head and face, from the top of his military hat to his braid-trimmed, stand-up collar. He had been frightened and had only caught quick glimpses, as he fought the

man in Jeffries' bedroom, but he was enough of an artist that he had memorized every little feature on the man's face. As soon as he was safely away from the area, he would carve an exact likeness of the captain. Then let people try to tell him they didn't believe him! If he was gone by the time the captain arrived at the front door, how could he have known what the man looked like? He smiled at his decision, but his smile quickly slid into a look of worry as he listened to the captain's words.

"I don't care how you do it; the boy has to die. They say he likes to carve animals and people and he's good at it. That should be a clue you can use. Head north and spread the word you're looking for a runaway slave boy who's thirteen and small for his age. Don't kill him 'til you get him alone with no one to watch, and then bring me his left hand. It should have a fresh cut across the top of it where I caught him good with a knife, and I'll know if you try to trick me by bringing some other boy's hand. Bury the body where no one will find it. There's a nice pile of gold waiting for the man who brings me that hand." The three men nodded silently. "And one more thing," the captain said. "There are three of you and one of him. If you *don't* get him, heads will roll. Understand?"

Ben stayed in the cold water under the bridge well into the night. He was so numb and exhausted when he climbed onto an isolated island well downriver, that he didn't even feel the few mosquitoes still out on the prowl. Just before plunging into an exhausted sleep, he decided his course was set. Osha was right. Whether he wanted to or not, he was about to become a wilderness man.