

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD DIDN'T TAKE TICKETS, JUST COURAGE

# BLACK MEN IN BRIGHT BLUE



FROM THE COMPLETELY ABRIDGED SERIES – VOLUME 1

DAVID-MICHAEL

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AUTHOR OF *HOW ANGELS DIE*

# **Black Men in Bright Blue**

by

David-Michael Harding

from

The Cats of Savone

The Completely Abridged Series –

8 Short Novels for Busy People

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*The Cats of Savone*, from which “**Black Men in Bright Blue**” is gleaned, is the 1<sup>st</sup> installment in the *Completely Abridged Series – Short Novels for Busy People*. The collection grew from the author’s teachings and letters on the Art & Science of Writing. This work contains examples of what David-Michael Harding refers to as newborn novels. “Most novels begin their lives as short stories. Consider Ernest Hemingway’s *Old Man and the Sea*, or John Steinbeck’s *The Red Pony*. Though in their entirety these classics are short in comparison to other works of the masters, each began life as a true short story. Writing, much like any gift, skill, habit, or hope, is strengthened through practice, training, and exercise. The short story is the stretching and dedication to a running regime long before the marathon. It is the repetition of scales on the piano, years before the recital.”

Read **My Boo Radley** and meet the peculiar ex-big league pitcher. **The Cats of Savone** will take you into the world behind the walls of a maximum security prison while in **Forever Beneath the Celtic Sea** you’ll feel your hands against the damp hull of a German U-boat in World War I. You’ll be taken back to a hidden side of the Civil War in **Black Men in Bright Blue** and somewhere unknown through **St. Alden’s**. Then saddle up to laugh and learn with **The History of West Texas According to Henry Brass**.

For fans of David-Michael Harding, these shorts and novellas are glimpses into the talent and passion his creations are layered in. Readers care about the people in a Harding story. You’ll cheer, jeer, laugh, cry, and inexplicably learn as characters dance, stumble, and recover at the tip of the author’s pen through the amazing reading delight Harding calls “edu-tainment.”

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David-Michael Harding is a life-long writer whose novel, *How Angels Die*, continues to receive critical acclaim. A former semi-professional football player, his writing is hard hitting and passionate. He holds a master’s degree in education and is an adjunct professor of writing.

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*The underground railroad didn't take tickets.*

*Just courage.*



## *Black Men in Bright Blue*

Rachel Justice saw the black men in bright blue in her dreams. Being ten years old lent itself to dreams, but being a young white girl in 1863, especially in South Carolina, the first state to secede from the Union, the presence of the black men bid her keep her dreams within herself. Yet to Rachel the dreams were much more vivid than just playful specters dancing across the nightscape of her mind. And still, the thoughts – real, dream, or otherwise – may have given cause for punishment or even The Treatment and rightly so she considered for the black men in bright blue had no place in her world. It was best they stay in the cloudy land of dreamy short lived visions that crowd a young girl's head.

Setting aside her concerns and the dreams themselves, the men had been real or nearly so, she thought. Rachel was quite certain she had seen them, but always after night had come. She was so certain of it that night's arrival at Providence, her father's plantation, did not necessarily bring with it friend Sleep. Rather than sleep, darkness brought an urge to pursue the dream. So Rachel would often leave the sanctuary of her bedroom within the main house and creep around the sprawling farm usually pretending to be a spy for General Stonewall Jackson. It was during episodes like this, when she would steal her way to the cabins of the field hands, magically transformed into a Union camp, that she would see the black men in bright blue passing beneath shadowed gables as silently as ghosts.

The row of small houses was on a makeshift dirt road. It was hardly a road at all as there wasn't a wagon or even a horse in the thirty-some-odd house shanty town. The cabins were below simple – one room laid-up rough log squares with clapboard roofs. Behind the swinging burlap that doubled as window pane and curtain, dim light bounced about and reached out to paint slow moving shadows on the dusty ground. As a rule, Rachel wasn't allowed down there during the day and after dark even her father seldom visited. Only the night, the dream, and General Jackson thought her being there permissible.

She made her first daylight visit to the town only recently when she accompanied her mother as they delivered a large bundle to one of the shacks. That day Rachel waited on the wagon seat as Colonel, their old cart horse, stood on three feet, resting the fourth and lazily swished his tail out of worn habit. While the old horse dozed behind drooping eyelids Rachel's eyes darted all around her. There were so many things they hadn't seen before. As it was with most new sights, each picture generated an abundance of questions which she was certain to press on someone. Far too quickly for Rachel's eyes and inquisitive mind, her mother returned to the wagon followed by an elderly black

woman who walked beneath the stoop of a slightly bent back and lagged badly. Ahead of her, Rachel's mother, Mrs. Martha Justice, covered the ground as if her steps were water gliding over a smooth rock. Even her footprints in the dust seemed elegantly placed.

"And to be sure, Carol Anne," Mrs. Justice said sternly as she climbed aboard the wagon and sat next to Rachel. "Three."

The movement behind him stirred Colonel and he placed all his feet beneath him in anticipation of moving on.

"Yes, 'am, Miss Justice," the black woman answered. "Three it is."

"Very good then. Best be busying yourself. The day is short already." With that, Mrs. Justice chirped to Colonel. He leaned against his harness and the wagon moved up and away from Carol Anne, whose words trailed off behind.

"Yes, 'am. Three. Gots to get three ready. Praise be Lord Jesus. Three! Amen. Three."

As Carol Anne neared her small house, she began to sing triumphantly. Rachel, who had been staring at her, looked from the black woman to her mother.

"Mother, why does Carol Anne live in such a tiny house?"

"That is all she requires. Her needs are few."

Rachel considered this for a moment. "Well, why does she live down here and not someplace else?"

Her mother paused before answering. "Because she works for your father."

"Then why doesn't she save her money and make a nicer house?"

This time the pause was longer and more awkward. "Carol Anne works at Providence and is given food, clothes, and a place to live in return for her labors."

Rachel came back with the quickness of a child's mind that sees the world in a simple light. "Does Carol Anne work hard, mother?"

"Yes she does."

"Then father should give her a nicer house. I shall ask father to give Carol Anne a nicer house."

Mrs. Justice didn't respond, but snapped the reins down on Colonel's rump. He snorted and the wagon lurched forward past two black men carrying garden tools toward the main house. Rachel turned in her seat as the wagon passed and watched the men until they vanished below the crest of a small hill which stood above the slave quarters.

Turning again to her mother she asked, "Do those men work for food and a tiny house too?"

"Yes," Mrs. Justice said without looking at her only child.

Rachel pointed to the bent backs of laborers some distance away in the fields. "And those folks there. They all work for free too?"

"Well, yes, but it's not exactly for free. They each get meals and—"

"Do they get paid money? Like when I do something for PaPa he sometimes gives me a penny. Do they get pennies?"

"No. They do not get pennies."

"Then why would they all stay here? I don't think I would stay without getting pennies. Why do they stay? I don't think I would stay."

"They must stay."

"But why? I don't think—"

Mrs. Justice pulled in Colonel's steps and the wagon stopped. She turned in her seat and looked closely at her daughter. "Rachel, do you know what a slave is?"

"A slave?"

"Yes. A slave."

"No."

"Rachel," Mrs. Justice said mechanically, "a slave is a colored man or woman, maybe an Indian, who belongs to another person."

Rachel looked back, but her eyes gave away her lack of understanding.

“Listen to me closely,” her mother continued. “The people who live here and work for your father are his slaves. They belong to him, like the fields and the cotton, tobacco plants, the peach orchard, and this wagon. And Colonel here. Your father owns Colonel so he takes care of him. Colonel cannot just wander up the road to the Jenson’s place because he belongs to your father. If your father let him go off wherever he wanted, we wouldn’t have a horse to pull our wagon, would we? And if we allowed the slaves to leave, we wouldn’t have anyone to tend the crops. See? These people you see around the plantation are like Colonel in many respects. They are taken care of in exchange for their work, just like Colonel is fed for pulling this wagon. Understand?”

Rachel nodded yes, though she didn’t completely. Her mother, wanting to put some distance between herself and the conversation, spoke to Colonel and the wagon moved again.

They were nearing the main house before Rachel spoke. “Mother, is Carol Anne a slave?”

“Yes she is.”

“Does she like being a slave?”

“I don’t...,” Mrs. Justice hesitated before continuing. “Rachel, there are a great many things you do not understand as yet.” She looked away and frowned to herself. “There are a great many things I don’t understand.”

Another moment and she turned her attention back to her daughter. “Slaves – slavery – is such a thing, darling. I can’t say I’m completely comfortable with it myself, but I am a woman of means and as such accept my station in God’s world.”

“Slavery. Mother, should I like slavery?”

“You should do as you are told and do what is expected of you throughout the majority of your life,” Mrs. Justice replied.

Rachel bowed her head as though she’d been scolded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Her mother suddenly reined in the confused horse once again. She slipped an arm around Rachel’s shoulders and spoke in a soft voice. “But there are times, my precious, when you must listen to another voice, one that comes from inside. From your heart. Often it speaks loudest of all, but we pretend not to hear. That is the voice we should listen to.” Mrs. Justice accented her words with a vigorous hug. “We should listen to our hearts.”

Rachel’s face became a smile as she moved tightly into the comforting fold of a mother’s arms. She loved it when her mother was like this – open, smiling, warm, and full of hugs. Often in the house she became someone else, someone cool and distant.

After another moment, the hug relaxed. Mrs. Justice spoke again and the baffled Colonel drew himself up to the main house. A stable boy approached with head down and silently took hold of the old horse’s bridle. Mother and daughter disembarked and headed into their expansive home. Rachel hesitated in the doorway and looked with a combination of wonder and sadness back at the boy, no bigger than her, as he led the big horse and empty wagon to the nearby carriage house. This notion of slavery was churning in her mind and raising a quiet tone in the young girl’s ears, but her mother’s voice called from inside the house and broke the spell.

“Rachel, come inside. The Daughters of the Confederacy will meet this evening. Be assured of having yourself prepared for our trip in proper fashion.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Rachel answered as she closed the door on her picture of the boy and the horse.

As the Carolina sun methodically relinquished its hold on the day, the field hands made their way to their shantytown. Night sounds began to echo across the fields as the smells of simple meals drifted out from the ramshackle houses. In the main house, Rachel was finishing her own dinner alone in the kitchen. Her parents ate separately in the formal dining room. A slave maid had prepared the meal, but was nowhere to be seen. Miraculously she would reappear each night and clear Rachel’s table just as she finished. Normally Rachel left the table with the dishes, but tonight she lingered and watched as black hands cleaned up after her. She was full of questions, but could not force them out onto her silent and unknowing teacher. Still, she watched and thought of work

and food, pennies, and Carol Anne's rickety home.

Night had a firm grip on the plantation as Mrs. Justice primped Rachel's dress in the large foyer of the house. "There. You are the absolute picture of a fine southern lady. Remember to hold your head erect as you greet the ladies in attendance this evening. You are a Justice and of proper breeding. I expect you to demonstrate as much."

Rachel resisted the urge to struggle against her mother's preening. Mrs. Justice could be very firm and even harsh in her role as matron of the plantation. Many times Rachel had witnessed her mother chide one of the maids to tears for an act or omission. But as Rachel stood in the hallway watching her mother's hands caress the bow on the front of her dress, it occurred to her that she had seen those same hands dole out huge bundles of food and clothes to many more slaves than had ever been lectured. It was peculiar, Rachel thought, that her mother was often like two people. One was aristocratic and cool and the other warm and giving, like the lady in the wagon who had explained voices of the heart to her that afternoon. That was the mother Rachel loved the most, as hard as it could be to find her.

Straight away the pair was walking across the front lawn to the carriage house with Rachel carrying a basket with her mother's contributions to the buffet for the meeting and two corn muffins for the short trip. Colonel had been hitched to the wagon some time before, probably by that same young boy, Rachel mused. She looked for him, but he wasn't to be found. A shadowy figure began to stir near the stable and approached the wagon just as Mrs. Justice and Rachel dropped onto the wooden seat. It was Mr. Calloway, the plantation foreman.

Rachel didn't like Mr. Calloway. He was always grouchy. Whenever he looked at her he snorted like a bull. Worst of all, he was never without a black leather whip which he carried neatly coiled and tucked under his belt. The whip had a name around Providence. It was called The Treatment. Though she had never seen him use it, she had once heard it cracking above the cries of a grown man. She had run from the sound of the whip and had fought to keep as much distance as possible between herself and Calloway ever since.

"Mrs. Justice, ma'am, you ought'n to be trapsin' around here in the dark."

Rachel's mother was startled by his sudden appearance, but recovered so quickly that neither Rachel nor Calloway took notice.

"My dear Mr. Calloway," she quipped with as much sarcasm as she could fit in next to her own drawl. "I am hardly trapsin'."

"No, ma'am. What I means is, you ought to be sportin' a light."

"I shouldn't think a light necessary. And since you brought it up, what is it that has you out here wandering about at all hours? Tell me that, my Mr. Calloway?"

"I thought you should be carryin' a lantern, especially on the road."

"Colonel knows the way quite well, thank you. And you haven't answered my question. Why are you out here meandering about in the shadows mimicking a highwayman or some wayward ghoul?"

"Just doin' my job, Mrs. Justice."

"Your job is to tend to the needs of this plantation and I don't believe skulking about in the dark is one of your primary duties."

"No, ma'am, but we been havin' a lot a runaways and Mr. Justice, he said--"

"Mr. Calloway, are you suggesting that my husband instructed you to hide in the shadows, sneaking about like a prowler, with designs to leap out to frighten his only child here?"

Rachel took her cue perfectly and quickly painted on a pouting face and widened her eyes in the moon's dim light.

"Well, no ma'am, but--"

"I should certainly hope not. Now, move along to your own quarters for the duration of the evening."

Providence's matriarch waved her hand condescendingly toward Calloway as though he smelled badly. "Go on. Get along with yourself."



“Yes’am, Mrs. Justice.”

Calloway’s figure was quickly swallowed by the darkness. Rachel was glad to see him go, but happier yet that she had witnessed her mother dress him down so.

Mrs. Justice shifted repeatedly on the seat and brushed at her dress as if to remove something Rachel was certain wasn’t there. As the elder justice fingered Colonel’s reins, she spoke in a voice that quivered with a nervousness that hadn’t been there just moments before.

“Well, there now. We’re shed of him. Aren’t we, Rachel? Now I suppose we can get on to our meeting in peace.”

There was a pause that should have been followed by the sound of the reins colliding with Colonel’s rump, but the sound didn’t come. The gap was so pronounced that Rachel actually leaned forward in anticipation of the lurch of the wagon, but nothing happened. Rather, Mrs. Justice resumed her uneasy banter and brushing until a rustling noise behind them drew both Rachel’s and her mother’s attention to the rear of the wagon. Though it was so dark she couldn’t see much further than just behind her own seat Rachel began to pivot quickly toward the noise. For her part, Mrs. Justice was unnerved. In fact, she became the picture of resolve that had a moment before summarily dismissed Calloway. With a firm and steady grip, Mrs. Justice grasped Rachel’s thin arm and squelched her effort to peer into the darkness of the wagon bed.

“Let’s be on our way.” With that the reins clapped and Colonel began his walk to the meeting.

“But mother, I heard something behind the wagon.”

“I’m sure it was nothing, dear.”

“No, mother. I heard something.” Then in a whisper, “I think there was someone behind the wagon.”

Her mother laughed at her quiet fear. “Oh, my darling Rachel. It’s just the dark. Just the dark playing tricks on you. Let’s have no more talk about it. Now tell me, what have you in your basket to nibble on during our journey?”

Soon the calming rhythm of the road and the taste of fresh corn muffins began to eradicate the recent memory of strange sounds in the dark. By the time Colonel stood at the hitching rail outside of the Jenson home, Rachel had all but forgotten it entirely.

The meetings of the Daughters of the Confederacy were loosely conducted over tea and around the pleasant conversation of southern ladies. Grace flooded the room with each wave of the guests’ flowing dresses. The women wore simple gowns designed for traveling, but each attendee had given their dress a little something extra – an additional row of pleats, a touch of lace, a contrasting color – to set its wearer apart and to proclaim, “Here is distinction!” It was expected and recognized by everyone.

As was generally the case there were about fifteen pictures of fashion present. Rachel knew most as being local women, with an occasional daughter as a traveling companion like herself. A few were unknown to her which made Rachel think they must be from far away as she knew everyone who lived within a day’s ride of Providence.

To Rachel these meetings were little more than organized gossip sessions, a theory both supported and promulgated by her father’s comments concerning the D.O.C. In fact, Rachel seldom recognized a meeting taking place at all. Her mother made the customary rounds between all the guests, alternating between listening and telling stories, trading compliments on the dress selected, the weather, and of course, the war. These conversations were often punctuated by subtle whispers in perfumed ears.

Talk of the war was something Rachel listened intently for. She couldn’t remember a time when there hadn’t been talk of war. The greatest extent of what knowledge she had on the conflict had been gained by eavesdropping on her father. Whenever he entertained a guest in his study, Rachel crept to the closed door and put her ear to the floor and listened at the threshold. It was here on the floor that she first conceived her game of spy. She would listen though she understood little and scamper away when the sound of creaking leather boots signaled an approach....

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Thanks so much,

*David-Michael*

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