"I will run away. I will not stand it. I would rather be killed running than die as a slave."

It was Frederick Douglass talking about his early life. He was making a speech in Nantucket, Massachusetts, in August 1841. The audience was shocked. This tall, handsome young man had once been a slave!

Yes, it was true. This man, who became one of the greatest leaders of the fight against slavery, was born a slave. The year was 1817. The place was a plantation in Maryland. While still a boy, Frederick was sent to live with his master's relatives in Baltimore. The wife of his new master taught him to read and write. For Frederick, nothing was more exciting. But then Frederick's master stopped his lessons. He did not think it was good for a slave to know how to read and write. In fact, it was against the law to teach a slave such things. White Southerners did not want slaves to get any "dangerous ideas."

When his lessons stopped, Frederick knew for the first time how evil slavery really was. He dreamed of freedom from that day on.

Resisting a "slave-breaker." When he was 16, Douglass had his darkest hours as a slave. His master hired him out to a very cruel man named Edward Covey. Covey was known as a "slave-breaker," because he knew how to break the spirit of any slave who did not obey. Covey whipped Douglass without mercy many times. At last Douglass could take it no more. When Covey tried to whip him again, Douglass put up his fists. He and Covey fought for nearly two hours. Finally Covey quit. He never tried to give Douglass a whipping again. Douglass was lucky. Some slaves who fought back were severely punished — or even killed.

Frederick Douglass was 21 when he decided to escape to New York. At the time, he was working as a slave in a Baltimore shipyard. He borrowed the papers of a free black sailor and dressed himself in a seaman's outfit. Then he got on a train headed north. It was a dangerous trip. Slave-catchers were always on the lookout for runaway blacks. But Douglass made it safely to New York. There he got in touch with people who belonged to the Underground Railroad. They sent him to New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Douglass wanted to live quietly. He did not want to do anything that would let slave-catchers know where he was. Then one day he was asked to speak at an anti-slavery meeting in Nantucket. Despite the danger, he accepted. Soon other anti-slavery meetings wanted to hear him speak.

Douglass was a fine speaker. Large crowds came to hear him wherever he
went. Sometimes they were not very friendly. In a few towns, Douglass was beaten by angry mobs. But he did not give up speaking to groups.

Douglass spoke so well that he ran into trouble. Some people doubted he had ever been a slave. He sounded too well educated. Actually, Douglass had never gone to school. He was well educated because he had read a great number of books on his own. But the leader of one anti-slavery group told Douglass to prove he was a runaway slave.

**Escaping from slave-catchers.**

As a result, Douglass wrote a book about himself called *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. In it he told all about his life as a slave. He named his masters and gave his own real name — Frederick Augustus Bailey. Soon slave-catchers were sent to arrest him. Douglass went to England to escape them.

Douglass liked England, and many English people liked him. They got together and bought his freedom from his former master. In 1847 Douglass returned to the United States. He moved to Rochester, New York, and started an anti-slavery newspaper. He called it *The North Star* after the star that guided runaway slaves at night.

The newspaper did not bring in much money. Yet Douglass managed to keep it going for the next 15 years. It gave a voice to other black writers. It was read by many abolitionists, both blacks and whites.

During these years, Douglass kept up his attack on slavery. His editorials tried to show why slavery was wrong. Douglass aided many runaway slaves, giving them money he had earned making speeches. He also helped a great many blacks to escape over the border into Canada.

Douglass called for equal treatment of the free black people of the North. He protested "White Only" signs in public places. He quarreled with black barbers who would cut only white men's hair. Moreover, Douglass called for equal treatment of women. He was one of the first American men to join the women's rights movement of the time.

But it was Douglass' brave fight against slavery that people remembered best. In this battle, there was no greater hero than he.

**A Second Look. . . .**

1. **How did Frederick Douglass, who grew up as a Southern slave, become famous in the North and then in England?**

2. **Frederick Douglass learned to read and write from his master's wife. He did not attend school as a child. Yet he ended up putting out his own newspaper. Why is this considered remarkable? Do you think you could learn to read and write without going to school? Why or why not?**

3. **Suppose you had the job of carving a few words of praise on Frederick Douglass' tombstone. The top of the stone reads: FREDERICK DOUGLASS (1817-1895). You can fit 25 additional words on the stone. What would you say?**

As a young slave, Frederick Douglass was kept from his lessons by his owner. The owner feared school would make Douglass "unmanageable" and "unhappy." When the schoolwork stopped, Douglass began to dream of escaping to freedom.