From the author of *Race to the Frozen North*

CATHERINE JOHNSON

Journey BACK to Freedom

The OLAUDAH EQUIANO Story

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With illustrations by
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Barrington Stoke

To my daughters

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CHAPTER 1

Kidnapped

My name is Olaudah, but I have had so many names: Michael, Jacob, Gustavus and Olaudah. Olaudah is the name my parents gave me, but most of my life I have tried hard not to think about them. The other names were given to me as a slave. So you, friend, may call me Olu.

My childhood was an ordinary one. I was born in 1745 in a place called Essaka in Africa, where my father was one of the elders. These were the men in our village who decided what to do about disputes or crimes. My family had cattle, grew crops, and I had six siblings – five

boys and one girl. I was the youngest son; my older brothers were all grown.

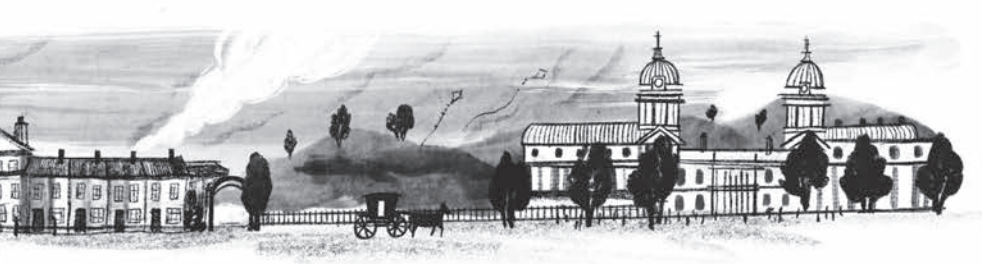
One day my mother and father went out to the market and left my sister and me at home with the other village children. At that time, it was known that men came up from the coast to kidnap villagers to sell, so we children took turns to look out for intruders. My sister and I were playing something similar to dice. Ifeoma was older, but I was winning. She sulked.

I was at the top of the tree, doing my turn as lookout, when I saw the men. A gang of them were coming up from the path that led to the village. All holding weapons. Spears. Guns. They were as tall and thin as trees, I thought. I shouted down to the others, "Run!" and the children scattered. My sister and I bolted like scared horses out of the yard and into the fields.

Ifeoma was always faster than me, but she was heading for the bush. I thought the tall maize would be safer. "Corn!" I yelled, and I saw her zigzag after me out of the corner of my eye.

My legs were burning. I gulped down air. I could hear Ifeoma behind me, her feet thumping on the earth. Then a sharp loud crack, and I wondered if this was the guns Father had told us about. There was a smell too, a smell I did not recognise then. Burning, hard.

I heard Ifeoma cry out, and I knew they must have caught her. I stopped, but I should have kept going. I don't know what I thought I could have done. Did I think I'd turn round and yell at those men with their large guns and sharp spears and knives? Turn round



and shout, while hitting them with my eleven-year-old fists?

The men caught me too. They roped us together with others – a coffle they called it. They stuffed our mouths with leaves and rags to stop us crying out and walked us for days and days towards the sea.

At the time, I thought it was the worst thing that had ever happened to me. Ifeoma and I whispered to each other that Father and Mother would search for us, find us and pay the men who had captured us to get us back. But days passed and we travelled west, and we stopped believing it.

My feet ached and turned to stone. My wrists were rubbed raw by the rope that bound them. There was no shelter from sun or rain or biting ants. At night all I heard were the cries of the younger children as I lay on the ground.

In the morning it was the pleading of the adults to be let loose as we set off on another long march.

From that moment, the life I had enjoyed in the village was over. Family meals, bickering over guinea-fowl wings (my favourite), holding Mama's hand, sitting on Papa's lap as he and the other elders discussed politics – it was all gone. For the next ten years, any choices about my own life were made by someone else – what my own name was, what I did, how I did it, where I lived, what language I spoke, whether I lived or died.

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After travelling for several days, we reached the port. The massive wooden boats were lined up like giant coffins. I had by now been separated from my sister. For all I know, she died at sea. Or perhaps she lived, and her back

was not broken from working in the fields? Perhaps her spirit managed to fly up and out of her body and flew east all the way back home. I cannot say.

The voyage was as bad as the slave trips you have read about in the newspapers. Such vicious acts of cruelty from one human to another I had never imagined. Until then I had never seen a white man. Even the men who captured my sister and I had been black men from another country, and I had been able to understand their language. But these sailors, the strangers they sold us to, seemed as different from me as they were vicious. Their cruelty knew no bounds – to each other as well as to us, their cargo. White man to white man. I thought they were worse than devils.

There was not one day on that ship when I did not think I would be killed. The sounds and

the smells were overwhelming, and I had never seen so much death. Babies especially died fast and were thrown overboard by the sailors like trash.

I find it hard to think about that time. I had to put all my memories in a kind of box inside my head – everything I thought about who I was, that boy called Olaudah. I would curl up as small as I could on the wooden deck, shut out the sounds of crying and wailing, and think of my home. My family. I tried to remember the shape of their faces, the way my mama smiled. But it grew harder and harder to recall their features with every day we sailed further from home. It felt to me like I had left the boy I was back home in our village. Now I was only some kind of living ghost.