

# THE QUARRY

**Mary Conner**

**Robert Ewings**

Shots rang through the woodlands. Mighty horses kicked up the dirt, heedless of the underbrush and overhanging branches. Their riders crouched low and clamped tight with their knees. They followed the howls of the hounds. Their noses pointed straight ahead, flying through the grass, hot on the chase.

A quarter mile ahead a small brown vixen scrambled through the underbrush. She ducked through curled up roots and leapt over patches of nettle. The dogs were on her trail now, so the only way out was speed. She had an instinct for the forest paths, a track of grass that bent easily under her paws, a turned over tree that forded small gully.

She burst out of the tree line into a wide clearing. There was a stream and beyond that more woodland. Freedom if she could get there. Less than halfway across the clearing the pack of dogs arrived and with the vixen in sight renewed their efforts. On their heels the galloping horses doubled their speed across the flat land, the men on their backs shouting and kicking to go faster.

She reached the bank and jumped,

In one moment, she saw the rider stand in his stirrups and hold his gun to his eye. There was a shout of pain that split the air and the water rose up to hit her.

‘Miss Conner, wake up!’ The housemaid was clamping Mary’s arms down in the sodden bed sheets. ‘Dear God, release her from this demon.’

‘It was just a dream. Please, I’m fine.’ Mary took off her soaked nightcap and started ringing out her thick curled hair.

The housemaid relented and busied herself with pulling apart the bedsheets. ‘Would you like me to refill the wash basin for you Miss?’

Mary scowled, ‘I’ll be fine.’

‘Are you sure Miss, you seemed sweaty from your, ahem, dream.’ The woman avoided Mary’s eyes but kept a firm lip.

‘Perhaps after a short walk then, I need some fresh air.’ A practiced smile sent the housemaid away and Mary sank into a chair.

Mrs Conner was already at the breakfast table reading some letters while warm porridge steamed idly. Mary sweetened hers with sugar and wolfed it down. She hadn’t realised how much the bad sleep and subsequent dowsing had made her ache.

‘Where are you off to this morning?’ Mrs Conner must have been briefed on the morning’s events.

‘Just a short walk. I won’t be too far.’ Mary said between spoonfuls.

The housemaid glared disapprovingly from her spot near the door.

Mrs Conner hadn’t looked up from her letter, struggling a little with the small print. ‘Oh bother. They’ve disallowed your adoption papers again.’

‘They’ll never let you do it ma. Especially with your brother-in-law lobbying against you.’

‘Nonsense Mary. He’s always said he’s quite happy with his lot, and why shouldn’t he be, he owns the largest plantation in the county. I just want to see you set up to flourish

after I'm gone.' Mrs Conner's husband had died early into their marriage. He hadn't had a chance to build his own wealth, so now Mrs Conner was living on a pension from his elder brother, also Mr Conner. It funded the cottage they lived in, the housemaid's salary, and Mrs Conner's eccentricities.

'And when Mr Conner turns me away, where do I go?'

'Don't be silly dearie, I hoped I would see you married.'

Mary took a moment to imagine that life. Her husband tilling his own land, two children playing in the yard. She would call them back inside for lunch during the hottest part of the day. 'I would like that, I think,' she whispered.

'I know you would. Now I must confess I don't personally know any of the free men in town. But I am sure there is someone among them who would appreciate your upbringing.'

The vixen curled up with a pair of pups in a dugout den. They suckled up to her as her mate fussed. He exited the den, then she heard a yelp and the sound of metal shutting closed. She made to get up, but the pups had clamped down hard holding her back. There was the sound of heavy footsteps approaching the den entrance.

A gloved hand reached in through the tunnel and grabbed one of the pups. Her claws scratched at the dirt as she tried to escape, but the den was collapsing around her. The last she heard was the mewling of the second pup as was taken out of her reach.

Mary fled the cottage, only grabbing a white shawl to keep warm. The weak winter sun hadn't taken the frost from the ground, so she focused on keeping her footing. Naked deciduous trees stood aimless in the empty fields. The path from the cottage took her to the main complex of the plantation. It consisted of barns, animal pens, the slave's barracks, and the Conner's house, most of which were deserted this early in the day.

Her daze was broken by a shout from a pair working on the fence line. 'Miss Conner, what are you up so early for?' The two men, who she now recognised as Ike and Charlie, were digging holes parallel to the wooden rail fence.

It was easier to 'Just came by for some fresh air. What are you working on?'

Ike stamped his shovel. 'Oh, I bet it gets stuffy in that cottage, getting fussed over by a housemaid.'

‘That’s alright, Ike.’ Charlie raised and lowered the crowbar to dislodge frozen topsoil. ‘We’re putting up a new fence.’

‘This one’s not good enough?’ Mary stood on the bottom rung of the wooden fence.

‘This’ll be a wire fence, for keeping out foxes.’ Charlie said.

‘All this extra work, why not just put it around the chicken coop?’

Ike seemed exasperated, ‘Well if you’ve got a problem with it you can take it up with Mr Conner. We just build the damn thing.’ He hefted the barrow full of dirt and headed back towards a barn.

Mary glanced around and hopped the fence, landing awkwardly in her boots.

‘Woah there, what are you up to.’

She put a hand to his mouth, ‘Hear me out. Will you keep a secret?’

‘Of course.’

‘Okay, I think I’m going to run away. I’ll join up with the railroad.’

‘You’re a free woman, why do you need to do that?’

‘Life isn’t all sunshine, no matter how much Ike may think it is. Ma says I need to find my own way, but I couldn’t settle down here. I’d be living in fear, and no self-preserving man in town would want to marry the rejected niece of the plantation master.’

Charlie held up a hand to stop her. ‘You want me to run away with you? That’s why you came to tell me.’

Mary couldn’t tell what he was thinking. He kept the same measured tone he used with everyone. ‘Well sure. I think it makes sense to me, in that sort of way.’

‘It makes sense to me too, in that way. But you see why it can’t be. I need to stay here and look after the others. Can you imagine Ike on his own?’ She knew it wasn’t just Ike. No one knew if whether they were to stay on the plantation or be sold somewhere else. She’d seen it happen over the years and had always admired the way Charlie supported the others through their grief. It would be selfish to take him away for her own.

‘Perhaps some other time then, some other place.’

‘No. If you leave, promise me you won’t come back. Find your own way and be happy there.’

‘Get back to work!’

Mr Conner was walking over from the main house, a cup of black coffee cradled in his hands.

‘Good morning uncle.’ Mary called as Charlie resumed his hole digging.

‘I’m not your uncle.’ He took a long sip from his coffee and studied Mary up and down. ‘Would you tell my sister that there’s no chance for her little scheme. I’ve suffered enough to have you running around, sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong and bothering my property.’

‘What else is family for?’ She knew humour wouldn’t help the situation, but she wished it could.

Mr Conner smiled. ‘It amazes me how stupid you people can really be. How do you think your *mother* came by you?’ He stepped forward so he was in her face. ‘She bought you. You’re not family. You’re not even a person. Just a dress up doll for the daughter she never had. And here is the fun part. When she dies, you belong to me.’

Mary was caught frozen even as her mind raced away. She had to run, just like she had said. She’d known all along, somehow. The way he’d looked at her as she grew up with Charlie and Ike; property, borrowed and soon to be returned.

The digging sounds had stopped. Instead, Charlie held the crowbar at rest, with his legs firm on the ground ready to rush forward.

She steadied herself and took a breath. ‘Goodbye Mr Conner. Goodbye Charlie.’ Then she returned to the cottage.

In the middle of the night, the vixen crept back onto the poultry farm. She sniffed out the direction of the coop and slipped through the darkness. Then a wire trap closed around the vixen’s neck and pulled the cord to an alarm bell.

The farmer, who had been waiting up on his porch, rushed over to see what he’d caught. Perhaps it wasn’t a good idea to come back so soon after her last chicken. He held her by the scruff of her neck as he undid the trap, so she couldn’t scratch him to let her go.

The farmer took her to a wire pen, dropped her in and covered it with a wooden board. No matter how much she barked he didn't come back to free her. So, she waited, crouched on the ground, sleepless.

When the rooster crowed the whole farm seemed to light up with activity. Hundreds of chickens poured out of the coop and running among them was a young hound. He beelined to her pen to look at the new smell.

He jumped about and stuck his nose through a gap to sniff her out. Curious, she tried to gauge what he was up to. Her first thought was that he wanted to eat her. The way the hunting packs ran made her think they were savage beasts that would tear her apart. But this one she could only describe as playful.

The hound was digging at the base of the wire that circled the pen, and the vixen joined in when she saw that the wire didn't extend into the ground. They worked together, and when it was large enough, she crawled through the hole to freedom.

The hound chased after her for a while but when she made it clear that she was going back to the woods he sulked back to guarding the chickens.

Mary had joined up with a group of five escaped slaves travelling up from the coast. They were all yard men from a stock farm and told an elaborate story of how they set the cattle loose in the middle of the night to distract the guards and slip away unnoticed.

They stayed two hundred yards to the west of the Mississippi River to keep their bearings as they moved from station to station. Mary enjoyed the journey until one day they were passing through a narrow valley that was being patrolled. The hunters were on foot, but there was no mistaking the long rifles they held at the ready.

The small group huddled in a shallow ditch, holding their breath. The men pushed Mary to the back to shield her, but she knew they would need to escape. The shouts from the hunters were growing closer and they could hear the sticks crack under their boots. Everything stayed still for a long minute as the sounds died away.

Then there was a gunshot and one of the men fell to the ground. Mary didn't have a chance to see who it was as everyone scrambled to get out. More shots flew past hitting no one so the hunters gave chase.

‘There’s a stream up ahead, we can lose them,’ someone called. Mary remembered her first nightmare being chased by dogs and riders. What if they hadn’t used up all their shots, there’d be no cover over the water. Instead she ran up the ridge, splitting away from the others.

The dirt was loose at this sharp angle, but the trees were firmly held by their roots, so she clambered up from trunk to trunk. There was a shout, thirty feet below one of the hunters was aiming his gun. The shot hit the tree and rained out splinters.

‘Get back here traitor!’ He was following her now and gaining steadily. She couldn’t outrun him; she didn’t have a weapon.

She remembered that last time she saw Charlie. Feet planted and ready to jump to her defence. She imagined it was Mr Conner moving up behind her, except now he wouldn’t be stopped.

The hunter grabbed at her dress. In one movement Mary spun around and kicked him with all the rest of her strength. The dirt slipped from underneath him and Mary grabbed a branch to steady herself. He fell back down the ridge and took the full impact of a tree trunk to the back of his head. She heard his last shout expire from pierced lungs and by the time she opened her eyes his had gone glassy.

Mary paused only to whisper a prayer before turning back north. When she made it to the next station the master fixed the scratches on her arms and legs. Only two other passengers had made it across the stream and outrun the hunters over a few miles. They continued the rest of the journey in a sombre mood and had no more trouble with slave hunters.

Mary paused on the edge of Lake Ontario. The cloak she had been given from the shelter kept her warm despite the dusk winds off the water. There were celebrations every time more passengers came into port, but her thoughts drifted to the people she left behind.

‘Good evening, miss.’ Mary was stirred from her thoughts by a cheerful voice from behind her.

‘Good evening, sir. May I ask with whom I have the pleasure of speaking.’ She didn’t realise she’d fallen back on Mrs Conner’s mannerisms.

His laughter only slightly embarrassed her. ‘My name is Jonathan, Jonathan Reynard. I gave myself that name because all the ladies here say I’m quite the catch.’

Now it was her turn to laugh, and she couldn’t stop. Not because of Jonathan, but she was reminded of Charlie telling her to be happy. Nothing she could do would ever fix the world she’d been born into, but now she could build a new one, wild and free.