PART TWO

FOLLOW THE NORTH STAR!

"The romance of American history will, of course, be found by posterity, in the lives of fugitive slaves."—
Colonel Thomas W. Higginson in
THE LIBERTY BELL *for* 1858, *p.* 47.

CHAPTER IV

THE BIRTH OF "MOSES"

"Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted because they are not."
Matthew ii. 18; Jer. xxxi. 15

Once Harriet Tubman thrilled to the new-found emotion of freedom, there developed in her an urge toward championship of others which became the unceasing work of her life.

Harriet said that at this critical instant she "felt like a man who was put in State Prison for twenty-five years. All these twenty-five years he was thinking of his home, and longing for the time when he would see it again. At last the day comes—he leaves the prison gates—he makes his way to his old home, but his old home is not there. The house has been pulled down, and a new one has been put up in its place; his family and friends are gone nobody knows where; there is no one to take him by the hand; no one to welcome him.

"So it was with me. I had crossed the line. I was *free;* but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom. I was a stranger in a strange land; and my home, after all, was down in Maryland; because my father, my mother, my brothers, my sisters, and friends were there. But I was free and *they should be free!* I would make a home in the North and bring them there! . . .[1]

With this resolve in mind she set out for Philadelphia. That city was large enough to be protective; she could find work there, lose herself within its immensity, and remain beyond the grasp of the slaveholders or their agents. She gained employment at once, and denying herself all comforts, hoarded every cent.[2] It was the most menial work, domestic labor of the type to which she was accustomed, cooking, laundering, cleaning and scrubbing. She labored in hotels and clubhouses, changing employment as she improved her income or working conditions. From Philadelphia she switched to a place at Cape May, New Jersey. There was a good reason why she passed from one post to another. . . .

Harriet was undergoing her first major experience in the North, the supremely important one of free labor. She was joyous at the discovery that she could select her own employer, or change jobs when conditions were unsuitable, and above all, retain her earnings or dispose of them as she saw fit. This confirmed in her the realization of the next great advance which the three millions of her people needed. Meantime her own achievement of free-labor anticipated, by almost two decades, the Negro mass arrival at this economic stage.

Soon after her arrival in Philadelphia she made the acquaintance of a valuable Negro named Willliam Still. He was the chief "brakeman" on the Underground Railroad in that city; this was an important post because the Quaker City was a veritable "Grand Central Station" on the Road. Still directed what was known as the Vigilance Committee (also called the Active Committee), which was a group of Negroes and whites who helped pass fugitives on to the North. Since 1847 he had clerked in the offices of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, and by now he was known throughout that State for his Abolition labors. To him posterity owes a debt of thanks for the records he kept of so many of the slaves that Harriet carried to freedom.

Her eyes opened to the incessant sacrifice of the Quakers. She observed how they raised funds to advance the work of the Underground; employed colored help if and when they were in a position to hire; boycotted South-made products in order to weaken the slaveholders; wrote and purchased anti-slavery literature; and in diverse ways transformed their moral creed into a force for freedom. In this first contact with the anti-slavery movement she was most impressed when she learned that hundreds of blacks were passing back and forth, annually, between the North and South, steering groups of fugitives to safety. Not all escaped through Pennsylvania, however, and in fact the peak of such activity was then in the Middle West, in the region of Ohio, where Levi Coffin was King of the Road, but there was a heavy traffic hereabouts, and Harriet prepared to enter into this, the front line of the revolutionary anti-slavery movement. She familiarized herself with the anti-slavery influences that had matured in the non-slaveholding states. She watched, with vital interest, the struggle to establish the Fugitive Slave Law which, if it were enacted, would make possible her recapture and return to the slave-owners.

Unable to read and write, she was handicapped in understanding all of the influences at work. Mainly she concentrated on saving her money in order to plunge into the task of abducting her family and friends. When she communicated with her family she had to dictate her letters to others. The earliest letters that Harriet dictated were those directed to the sister whom she first brought to the North. Intermediaries conveyed the plan of escape to this sister. In December, 1850, she visited Baltimore and brought away her sister and two children. They had come up from Cambridge in a boat, under the protection of her sister's husband, a free black.[3]

A living relative, Harkless Bowley, the son of the sister aided by Harriet, has added a few words to this episode, as Harriet described to him the story of the flight. She had told him of her plan to get his mother away from Cambridge, Maryland. The breakaway occurred on the day his mother was to be sold at auction to another slave-owner. During the course of the sale, conducted at the courthouse, the auctioneer went to dinner. Meantime his mother was hidden in a house only a five minutes walk from the courthouse.

"When the auctioneer returned, mother was gone. My father, John Bowley, took mother and two children in a small boat to Baltimore. Aunt Harriet had a hiding place there for her. In a few days she took her and the children and several others aboard the Underground Railroad." [4]

Harriet ushered this company into the free states, but what happened to them thereafter is no more a matter of record than is the history of most slaves who fled the South. There is, of course, a general explanation: that the experiences of the escaped blacks, both on their way North and after achieving freedom, were not greatly different from Harriet's. All entered into the Northern free labor economy; many participated in the radical movement; they lived their personal lives, of course; and later, when the war broke out, they did their bit in behalf of the Federal Union. Thus, their histories, after freedom, were similar to Harriet's, hers differing only in its intensity, only in that she was immeasurably more the leader than any of those whom she rescued.

Much is concealed behind the rather innocent phrase, "she visited Baltimore and brought away her sister and two children." To look simply at this and not examine the drama that lies beneath, is to miss the story of "the true romance of America." Ignoring for the moment that Harriet and her companies had to journey hundreds of miles, with each step of the way a peril, we get a glimpse of the danger involved in the fact only of their having to be in Baltimore after escaping. A Baltimore writer, Katherine Rose Foster, white, discussing Harriet's work in that city, touched upon the proscription at that time. "This city used to be a difficult place for even free colored people to get away from, and much more so for slaves. A law forbade a Negro's leaving here by railroad or boat without being weighed, measured, and then given a bond signed by persons well-known locally." [5] Harriet had to know how to circumvent these and scores of other hazards.

It has often been said, "She made nineteen trips into the slave country," but the meaning of this enormous enterprise has been hidden in the lack of illustration. A trip into the slave territory and the "kidnapping" of a band of blacks was no less than a military campaign, a raid upon an entrenched and an armed enemy. If it was anything less than a military task then it would not have engaged the attention of such a martial figure as John Brown, as for many years it did. If conducting was not a military assignment then no men would have been hounded, harassed, jailed and wounded, and no lives would have been lost. The Underground Railroad era was one of prolonged, small-scale guerilla warfare between the North and the South, a campaign that, for its activities, was often violent and always perilous. It was so much like guerilla warfare that it influenced John Brown into the theory that a more extensive development of this type of conflict might be useful as a means of breaking the grip of the slaveholders upon the economy, the politics and the government of the nation; it was one of the longest campaigns of defiance in the nation's history. When it is remembered that the Underground was an institution in American life for at least a half century, that by 1850 it was an issue so much at the core of the American problem that it called forth an ignominious Fugitive Slave Law, and that it was one of the greatest forces which brought on the Civil War, and thus destroyed slavery,[6] then alone is it possible to comprehend its significance. Harriet Tubman's outstanding participation in the Underground in its last and most vigorous phase, from 1850 until the Civil War, must be approached in the light of such a far-reaching influence as that.

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Almost from the start of her activity as a conductor on the railroad to life, she operated under the harassment of Senator Mason's Fugitive Slave Law. This bill, of the most repressive nature, took as its first toll the political reputation of Daniel Webster, who at the time was regarded as the nation's outstanding statesman. When, out of political opportunism, he sought to compromise the feud between the North and South by championing the view of the slaveholders that escaped Negroes must be returned to their owners, he pitched suddenly in the esteem of the North and never thereafter regained his prestige. This repercussion served to illustrate how much at the heart of the times was the fugitive slave question. Simultaneously, thousands of Northerners who had been passive to the question of slavery awakened, and resented the law that gouged their rights; and their anti-slavery mood became crystallized. A part of the North settled down to the business of openly defying the law. Of course, some officials here and there proceeded to enforce the act, but it quickly became the majority belief in the free states that there was more justice in the defiance of the law than in its observance.

Probably the most revolting stipulation of the act was that a man claimed as a fugitive was to have no right of trial by jury! This assumed guilt of the accused beforehand and thus flaunted all prior practice of Anglo-Saxon jurisprudence. An alleged fugitive was also denied his right of habeus corpus! On the contrary, the law specified that a special commissioner was to have sole power to decide the question of slavery or freedom for any fugitive, and this upon a warrant presented by any slave catcher. Most of all, this act, actually once a part of the Federal law, contained a bribe! The commissioner's fee was only five dollars if he freed the Negro, and ten if the fugitive were sent back to slavery. Add to that, and here was the catch that aroused even the most neutral to the question of slavery: all citizens could be called upon by the sheriff to help capture a wanted black man, and if they refused they were subject to legal penalties—fining and even imprisonment. Such an act, in its latitude of provisions for the repression of a people, white and black, made every Northerner a party to the question of slavery, and by its very nature it created anti-slavers ten times more rapidly than had the Abolitionists with their score of years of agitation!

Harriet intensified her operations just about when enforcement of the bill began, making her Underground efforts doubly dangerous.

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Success with her first party emboldened a second return to the South a few months later, and this time she brought away her brother and two other men.[7]

Throughout this period she dreamed of returning to John Tubman in order to bring him North, but this was not until two years after her escape. She does not seem to have reached her old home in her first two expeditions.[8] When at last she ventured into Dorchester County to see him it was the Autumn of 1851, and then she found her husband and learned of his infidelity. At once she abandoned him forever and collected a party of fugitives and brought them safely to Philadelphia.[9] It was her third descent into slave country; for two years she had toiled incessantly, saved money, and spent it upon these bands of fleeing Negroes. Her efforts, almost from the start, extended beyond the rescue of her own immediate family; and indeed, in the third flight the party was composed of entirely unrelated fugitives.

With the enforcement of Mason's law, residence in the free states became unsafe for fugitives and their families, and there was an exodus of them to Canada. In Massachusetts alone, forty Negroes sped to Canada within thirty-six hours after the measure became law. Likewise in Pennsylvania and in New York State, in those cities and towns where there had been large settlements of escaped blacks, there was a "refugee march" to the North country. Here they were safe, for in 1833 Queen Victoria had proclaimed free all of the colored on Canadian soil. The earliest evidence of Harriet's arrival in Canada is in 1851, when she piloted a party of eleven to the town of St. Catharines. In this refuge, part of a territory known as Canada West, Harriet made her home for the next six or seven years—if it can be said that she, with her constant traveling in these years, regarded any spot as her home.

That was Harriet's fourth journey. Having learned that she could outwit the forces of the law, the agents, the bloodhounds and the press, she returned to Maryland in December of that year. In the party of eleven were her brother and his wife. For all she sought safety "under the paw of the British lion," as she described Canada. Frederick Douglass, living in Rochester, may have sheltered this entire party. He gave aid to the Underground, protecting fugitives who went through Rochester, while on their way to Canada. Writing of the Underground line, he referred to a party to which he was once host: "On one occasion I had eleven fugitives at the same time under my roof, and it was necessary for them to remain with me until I could collect sufficient money to get them to Canada. It was the largest number I ever had at any one time, and I had some difficulty in providing so many with food and shelter, but, as may well be imagined, they were not very fastidious in either direction, and were well content with very plain food, and a strip of carpet on the floor for a bed, or a place on the straw in the barn-loft."[10]

With her party of eleven Harriet undertook more than merely their removal to a free clime. It was a severe winter for the runaways. They earned their bread by chopping wood in the snows of a Canadian forest; they were frost-bitten, hungry and naked. Harriet kept house for her brother, and the ex-slaves boarded with her. She worked for them, begged for them, encouraged them, and carried them through the hard winter.[11]

St. Catharines, the first point of arrival in the free climate, became one of the main centers of freedmen's activities in that decade. This place was the northernmost center of Harriet's activities for several years. St. Catharines' population was about six thousand. The Reverend Hiram Wilson presided over the Negro community, and it was to him that Harriet brought her parties of fugitives on her journeys thereafter. For the self-freed he found temporary shelter, employment, and permanent homes in one or another of the Canadian cities. It was here that Harriet had her first real taste of freedom and learned what it was to live, as a human, in a "modern" town. The Welland Canal went through St. Catharines, and the town was improved enough to have a telegraph and railway line; the populace lived in small, neat, wooden homes; there was no Jim Crow section, and Harriet, for the first time—like the other Negroes—felt herself belonging to a community. St. Catharines became a kind of experimental grounds; it was a bee-hive of interest for the Yankee anti-slavery movement, for here were the first Negroes on the American continent—on a large scale—with the opportunity of proving themselves as citizens. The colony plunged into the task, demonstrating its worth by working industriously, keeping up their homes carefully, buying property, convening to discuss the plight of themselves and their enslaved brothers, handling matters of their own civic relation to St. Catharines, and educating themselves as rapidly as possible. Harriet yearned for such a state of affairs as this for all of her people, and she could never for long remain in that flourishing atmosphere without making fresh plans to speed South and capture a few more "articles," as the slaves were called in their masters' ledgers.

By now she was passionately aware of the movement for freedom all through the North and among the Canadian fugitives. She realized that the anti-slavery struggle was a multi-sided affair. She learned of the Garrisonians, with their dis-unionist aim and their belief that the Constitution was essentially a pro-slavery document, and she heard others, political actionists, discuss Frederick Douglass' belief that the Constitution was an anti-slavery document, and that the Negro could go free within the framework of the present society, the present Constitution. She heard of the Colonizationists and their hope of building a Negro world in Africa, but this she scorned: she who had worked the United States soil knew that this land was hers and it must be made to serve her interests. She believed in the power of the Underground as the front line against slavery. She perceived in this more than the mere rescue of her fellows. She knew that each time a black left a plantation the slave-owner suffered a sharp economic setback. If the masters underwent large enough losses many would be ruined and slavery might become unprofitable and insecure. Harriet knew that each abduction from the South was a recruit to an anti-slavery organization in the North. Every time white sympathizers with the Road were brought into activity to help along fugitives, the Negro gained allies or strengthened those he already had. Harriet knew that the Underground was the immediate struggle. Emancipation might be the aim of Garrison, of Douglass, and of many others, and this indeed was her chief aim as well, but the Underground was a process that would develop the North, and organize and educate it for the time when it would have to face a belligerent South.

In the Spring she returned to the States. She earned money by cooking for families and working in hotels. From Cape May, in the Fall of 1852, she went back once more to Maryland, and brought away nine more fugitives.[12]

In five journeys Harriet had rescued a number totalling not less than thirty and probably not exceeding forty. Already they were calling her Moses, and talking of her bravery. Rapidly she was building a mansion for freedom, and her legend was growing. Like Paul Bunyan who swung an axe and felled a forest, and black John Henry who could outdrill the steam engine: such was Harriet, who, when she took one step, straddled all of the states and placed a foot in another country! Only she was real and no myth! And a *woman*, something new in the lore of giant life!