Chapter V

A CHRISTMAS GIFT FOR CANADA

"There is strength
And a fierce instinct, even in common souls."
Felicia D. Hemans

Harriet Tubman said that during the period when she regarded St. Catharines as her home, which was from 1851 to 1857, she made eleven journeys into the slave country. This meant that she operated regularly throughout those years, working in the Canadian town intermittently, but making about two trips a year, and managing to spend several months annually in the Maryland region. It was during the mid-fifties that some of her most important campaigns occurred, and in these years belong numerous fragments of adventures that cannot with certainty be dated. It was not until the close of 1854 that Harriet "stole" three of her brothers in one nip, walking off also with three other persons, all of whom hailed from the Bucktown-Cambridge zone. . . .

As was frequent in Harriet's campaigns, the groundwork was laid by the use of a code letter. In this instance Harriet engaged a Northern assistant to write to a free Negro in Dorchester County who could read and write, and who, from time to time, aided escaping slaves. This was Jacob Jackson, a fellow conspirator, whose job this time was to notify Harriet's brothers of her approach. The significant passage in the communication reveals the utilization of the biblical tradition: "Read my letter to the old folks, and give my love to them, and tell my brothers to be always *watching unto prayer,* and when the *good old ship of Zion comes along, to be ready to step aboard."*

The postal authorities, who examined all mail addressed to slaves, intercepted the note, suspected the religious wording and other dubious features of the letter, and they called in Jacob Jackson to ask him the meaning of its contents. The free Negro knew at

once the importance of the communication, but he said, "That letter can't be meant for me. I can't make head or tail of it." Yet he immediately notified Harriet's brothers that she was coming, advising them that they must be ready to start for the North.

The abductor arrived barely in time, for her three brothers, Benjamin, Henry and Robert Ross, were under duress: they had been threatened with the danger of immediate transfer to the hated deep South. Their sale, to go down to the cotton and rice fields with the chain gang, had been set for Christmas Day, but as the holiday happened to fall on a Sunday, the sale was postponed until the next day, and this gave Harriet just time enough to perfect the escape. She established contact with them, and gave them secret notice to be ready to start immediately after dark, the first stopping-place to be their father's cabin, forty miles away.[1]

The cabin of their parents, Benjamin and Harriet Ross, was in Caroline County, conveniently north of Dorchester. There is the word of Ben Ross himself, in a statement several years later, that their master, Doctor Thompson, in addition to his slaveholding had been interested in real estate to the extent of a dozen farms, at least,[2] and on one of these, in the county north of Dorchester, they were located, and slaving through their declining years.

But an unforeseen circumstance prevented the perfect functioning of the flight.

Perhaps the most trying situation among slaves was that in which a husband or wife, rather than continue under the terror of a brutal overlord, took the road to freedom, leaving his or her mate behind in slavery. As it often happened, one might be suffering terribly while the other was in a situation which was, at least, tolerable. Then came a struggle between love of one's mate, or love of liberty. In many cases love of liberty prevailed—and such an instance occurred upon this very journey, involving Harriet Tubman's brother, Henry Ross.[3]

At the hour when Henry Ross was supposed to join with the others in a dash toward their parents' shack in the uplands, his wife took to bed with approaching childbirth, and he had to go for a midwife. With this development, Henry decided to remain—at least for a few hours.

But when Harriet was ready, she never waited for anyone, nor did she wait for Henry. She gave orders to the brothers Benjamin and Robert who were on hand, and to two other men and a woman who meant to escape, to start with her at once.

In most men's lives the fact of one's wife giving birth to an infant would delay plans of any type. But a slave's life was dislocated from reality; there was no sense or logic to slavery's processes, and inversely, this gave to its victims a rationale that also followed no normal precepts. The birth could not have taken long, and at once Henry Ross became desirous of flinging out for the North. If he didn't go now, he might not again have the opportunity for a long time.

It was difficult for Henry to leave his wife, who had just gone through such travail, and added to this, she suspected his design. He would start for the door and she would ask where he was going. Once he went out of the door, and stood by the corner of the house, near her bed, listening. At length he heard her sobbing and crying, and not being able to endure it, he went back.

The last words of the wife, Harriet Ann, to her husband, were, "You're going to leave me; but, wherever you go, remember me and the children."

Nor does there seem to have been in Harriet Ann's mind any further question, neither an issue such as forgiveness, nor a need for censure: there was only this grim and tortuous hour—atop the childbirth—an exclamation of despair, and then acceptance of a situation that was bred by the hopeless nature of their white-enshrouded environment.

Henry Ross broke away into the night at full speed for his father's cabin.[4]

Sometime during the middle of Christmas Eve the main party, exhausted and famished, arrived in the vicinity of the Ross Cabin in Caroline County. Harriet was accompanied by two men, John Chase and Peter Jackson, a girl named Jane Kane, and the Ross brothers, Benjamin and Robert. They headed for the fodder house, located near the cabin.

Harriet had not seen her mother ever since her escape in 1849, which was at least five years before. However, she and her brothers

decided not to let the old woman know of their arrival in the neighborhood for fear that she would raise an uproar which might endanger them. To add irony to the situation, the old woman had been expecting the boys all day, to spend Christmas with her as usual. She had killed a pig, made all the other preparations that her means could afford and she sat watching for their arrival.

Here then were three of her children, and one of them the famous and long-absent "Moses," only a few yards away from her, and she was destined not to see any of them! It was a poignant moment all around. Harriet decided to send the two strange men to the cabin to arouse old Ben, to acquaint him with the presence of some of the family, to advise him of the plan of escape, and to warn him not to allow mother Rit to know what was going on.

John Chase and Peter Jackson advanced from the fodder house to the Ross cabin, and attracted the attention of the father; he came outside into the cold Yuletide night air, and he heard their story. Immediately he gathered provisions, and went to the hiding place, slipping the food within the door. But here is one of the few insights to the character of Harriet Tubman's father. . . .

Ben Ross knew that he must not see any of his children, no matter how he aided them. He knew that his sons' mistress, Eliza Ann Brodins, or one of her representatives, would arrive at the Ross cabin in a day or two and ask Ben if he had *seen* his children. He did not want to tell a lie; and therefore, he would have to help his children without looking at them—even though he knew Harriet was here—Harriet, whom he had not seen since her first flight!

Meanwhile, Henry Ross, hurrying through the night miles from Bucktown, arrived at daybreak and joined the group in the storage house.

The strange drama of old Ben coming to the hiding place several times, but not seeing his children, went on all through that woeful Christmas Day. It rained very hard all that day, and the party could do nothing other than to wait for nightfall. It was a forthright crew that hid in the fodder house, looked down at the old folks' cabin and discussed their escape. Benjamin Ross has been described as "twenty-eight years of age, chestnut color, medium size and shrewd." Robert Ross, aged thirty-five, the oldest member of

the company "had hardly been treated as well as a gentleman would treat a dumb brute." John Chase and Peter Jackson were of like mould, and had rebelled from similar masters. Twenty-two-year-old Jane Kane declared that her master, Rash Jones, was "the worst man in the country." [5]

With desperation born of such a background it is possible to understand the discipline with which Harriet and her brothers looked at the parents' cabin, all day long, saw their mother moving about, and yet would not reveal their presence. That night, just before it was time to leave, Harriet and her brothers stole down to the cabin, looked in through the little window of the place and took a farewell view of their mother as she sat by a fire, with a pipe in her mouth and her head on her hand as she rocked back and forth in her chair, wondering what had happened to detain her sons from the Christmas dinner.

When the time came for the escape to resume, Old Ben went a short distance with the party, but in a strange manner. He tied a handkerchief tightly over his eyes so that he would not be able to see them! In this way he accompanied them for a time, until at last the father and his children bade farewell. They left him blindfolded, standing in the road, ready to turn back, as they went on to the North.

Nor is there anything incredible in this account of old Ben's preparation for the white lie he later had to tell the slave-hunters. He was religious and honest, and falsehood was alien to his nature. And when the "head hunters" came to his cabin a day or two later to ask whether the escaped sons had stopped here, the aged Rit said she hadn't seen her sons at all, not even for Christmas, and she was heartbroken over it. The report also went back to Doctor Thompson that Old Ben hadn't *seen* one of his children this Christmas,—and that was good enough for Doctor Thompson! [6]

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It was several days before the party arrived at Wilmington, calling at the home of Thomas Garrett. The journey thus far was entirely on foot, for when they arrived, Harriet was almost barefoot, and one of the men was about shoeless too. They had gone by

night through a gauntlet of towns, including Dover and Smyrna, said to be "the two worst places this side of Maryland line," [7] through Canterbury, Camden, Moreton, Middletown, Pleasant, St. George, French, Elkton, and at last arriving at the Quaker's house in Wilmington. It was cold traveling and food was not plentiful, but they cheered one another as Harriet, by all of the devices of her several years experience, took them, at last, to Garrett's welcome shelter.

It was the night of the 28th of December when Harriet and her company started away from the Quaker's place on the next important leg of their journey. The Wilmington Abolitionist wrote a letter the next day to J. Miller McKim, of the Vigilance Committee in Philadelphia. McKim was white and one of the most important anti-slavery men in Pennsylvania. He had been one of the earliest to raise his voice for freedom, being in the work as far back as 1832. Garrett wrote:

Wilmington, 12 mo. 29th, 1854

> Esteemed Friend, J. Miller McKim:—We made arrangements last night, and sent away Harriet Tubman with six men and one woman to Allen Agnew's, to be forwarded across the country to the city. Harriet, and one of the men had worn their shoes off their feet and I gave them two dollars to help fit them out, and directed a carriage to be hired at my expense, to take them out, but do not yet know the expense . . .
>
> THOMAS GARRETT [8]

McKim, William Still and the others of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee received them at just about the time when Garrett's letter arrived. It was a group that much impressed the Philadelphians, for it gave them an opportunity to meet three of Harriet's brothers, and they were pleased to see more of Harriet's stock on their way to freedom. William Still wrote an interesting entry in his valuable chronicle upon this occasion. Of Harriet he said, among other things, that "she was a woman of no pretensions, indeed, a more ordinary specimen of humanity could hardly be found among the most unfortunate-looking farm hands of the South." [9]

And this "ordinary specimen of humanity" took them all forward, station by station, through the Underground networks, until at last, early in 1855, they reached St. Catharines—and freedom.