Chapter VI

THROUGH THE UNDERGROUND NETWORK

Although the center of Harriet Tubman's Underground operations was in the region of her birth, Dorchester County, Maryland, and in neighboring counties, her abductions were carried on throughout the East, and even into the far South. She had heard of the high death rate in the rice swamps, and the labor in chains, and it was her very fear of being sold into this bondage that had finally motivated her to escape; yet when she entered into *conducting,* she ventured into that region. Once when Harriet was working as a cook in a large hotel in Philadelphia, the play, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," was being performed. Her fellow servants urged her to see it, but she refused, saying, "I haven't got the heart to go and see the sufferings of my people played upon the stage. I've heard "Uncle Tom's Cabin" read, and I tell you Mrs. Stowe's pen hasn't begun to paint what slavery is at the far South. I've seen the *real thing,* and I don't want to see it on any stage or in any theatre." [1] The Negro historian, William Wells Brown, also refers to Harriet's adventures into the most difficult parts of the Southern country.[2]

There has been some difference of opinion as to whether Harriet used the Appalachian route, this being one of the most important passages to the North. That route extended as far South as Georgia and Alabama, and although Harriet, John Brown, and a conductor named Dillingham are reported to have used it, another historian, Wilbur H. Siebert, states that Harriet told him that she did not travel by the mountain route.[3] There is no reason why she should have found it necessary to function in the Mid-West when there were so many thousands in the East who were always ready to flee with any responsible conductor undertaking to lead them. Most of the evidence of Harriet's action deals with her piloting from the Eastern Shore northward along the East Coast, and westward from Albany to Canada. In the Maryland-Delaware region she was thoroughly acquainted with the stations and hiding places: she knew

the roads, the swamps, the forests and other out-of-door protections; and she learned to know scores of white and Negro friends who helped her along. It was natural then that she should function best in that environment. Proof of her operations primarily in the East is William Still's history of the Underground Railroad which is a veritable monument to Harriet's work.

Harriet's route from Maryland to Canada was a checkered one, even though she usually managed to reach Philadelphia and New York on her way to free soil. Her most favored passage was that which took her northward out of Dorchester County into the State of Delaware, then into New Jersey and Pennsylvania until she reached Philadelphia. This was regarded as the most difficult stage of the journey, as the travel was through slaveholding and pro-slavery country until Pennsylvania was reached. Once within that state there were very live dangers of recapture, for many citizens obeyed the Fugitive Slave Law implicitly and were always ready to claim a reward for nabbing a helpless slave on the move. Some of these rewards went into the thousands of dollars, and one report has it that the rewards for Harriet alone reached as high as forty thousand dollars (probably total rewards offered by various authorities); and each town had its special commissioners, many being anxious to earn ten dollars for returning a fugitive. Harriet made use of stations at Camden, Dover, Blackbird, Middletown and New Castle in the State of Delaware, on her way to Wilmington and Philadelphia.[4]

At Camden, for example, Harriet and her broods put up at the Cooper House, a regular stopover for fugitives. This gray-painted, brick house was near the north entrance of the village. Negroes were concealed in a small, bunk-lined room above the kitchen. This hide-out was entered by a ladder, and a round window near the peak of the roof admitted light and air. At Odessa, Delaware, the slaves often stayed at the Friends Meeting House, on the south side of the main street. It was a plain brick structure about twenty feet square, with a pitched roof and pent eaves across the gable ends. This roof covered a loft in which the blacks hid.

So on, through the towns of the border states, the fugitives found shelter in homes of all types, in buildings of all sizes, in infinite forms of concealment. They were hidden in chimneys, in

barns, under hay and straw, and sometimes in "potato holes" which were board-lined dugouts in the ground ordinarily used to store produce.

Delaware's most important station was that of Harriet's good friend, the Quaker, Thomas Garrett, at Wilmington. He was the outstanding champion of the Negro in that state, and in the course of his career he aided about 2,700 fugitives on toward the North. He admired nobody more than he did Harriet whose caravans he constantly sheltered. An ample corps of station masters and local conductors operated around the Garrett region, most of them functioning in conjunction with him, and regarding him and his house as the center of the Delaware movement. Mostly these aides, if they were not colored, were, like Garrett, Quakers. Harriett came to know all of these allies intimately.

In Chester County, a hotbed of the Road, there were dozens of assistants, with John Hunn and Jacob Lindley as the leaders. Doctor R. C. Smedley, a historian of the Underground Railroad in that county says that Harriet sent on parties, unaccompanied by herself, but inspired by her encouragement and directions, and these passed through the Chester County stations regularly.[5]

In other nearby counties the work plunged ahead with the same zeal. William Rahenstraw and Day Wood of Lancaster County forwarded passengers on to James Taylor and Levi B. Ward in West Marlborough. All of this was in the very region of the Mason-Dixon line where the chase was hardest, the risks most severe. The Reverend James E. Mason, of Livingston College, a Negro educator who knew Harriet, wrote of her difficulties in this section where the slave chains were heaviest and where the "crack of the slaveholder's lash repeatedly resounded in her ears." [6]

From there they went to John Vickers, or William and Simon Barnard in Darby; or if not to them, then to John Jackson, also in Darby; and from here they were passed on to Philadelphia. Sometimes James Pugh went to Philadelphia and notified the Vigilance Committee of the arrival of a group in nearby Pennsbury. Then J. Miller McKim of the Quaker City abettors of the Underground, or one of his associates, proceeded to the outskirts of Philadelphia and met this latest incoming command. Philadelphia was a pivotal con-

nection for escaping troups. Here the fugitives were "examined" by a committee; William Still recorded the slaves' experiences, and the organization helped them on to New York. Not all cities had, like Philadelphia, an actual organized group such as the Vigilance Committee.

Harriet learned of these sympathisers very early in her work. Certainly she knew many of them by 1852. "These gave her money which she never spent for her own use, but laid up for the help of her people, and especially for her journeys back to the 'land of Egypt' as she called her home . . ." [7]

In New York she called with her groups at the offices of the Anti-Slavery Society where Oliver Johnson and others greeted her. From there Harriet and her gangs jumped to Albany. The travel between these two points was by a variety of means—foot, stage-coach, railroad and even boat ride up the Hudson River. This was the most eventless portion of the Underground of any of its lines in the nation. The sparsely settled banks of the Hudson, and the diverse means of travel available, made for relatively safe passage. Then, too, the New York office of the Anti-Slavery Society was a strong branch: when parties proceeded from New York they were financially secure, the "brakemen" were experienced, and the network was more securely organized than in the border states.

The Road had some of its staunchest supporters in New York State, especially from Albany across the breadth of the state. The Underground touched at Troy, Schenectady, Fonda, Little Falls, Peterboro, Canandaigua, Oneida and at last it reached another "junction" or station of importance, the Reverend J. W. Loguen's at Syracuse.

An interesting stop that usually preceded Harriet's arrival at Loguen's home was the famous Peterboro mansion of Gerrit Smith, the powerful political figure, reformer and philanthropist. According to his cousin, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the Peterboro place was an important station on the Underground. The barn and the kitchen floor were utilized as chambers for the fugitives. And here Harriet met Smith's friends, described by Mrs. Stanton as "choice society from every part of the country." [8] Whenever she found herself among such groups she responded to their urgings to describe the

South and to relate her adventures. However, of this society, only the discerning Gerrit Smith possessed a real understanding of her value. He admired her military fibre and her organizational talents, and the least he could do in tribute he always did: before she left he pressed a few banknotes into her hands and commanded her to take good care of her charges.

Then to Syracuse, where Harriet and the black Reverend Mr. Loguen became fast friends, cooperating now in the fugitive work, and later joining with Captain John Brown in the matter of the uprising at Harper's Ferry. In Syracuse too, the Hazards, Garnets and Rowlands, Abolitionists, were her abettors and friends.

If Boston was the agitational center for New England, then Central New York was the stage for the Empire State. Abolition and woman suffrage thrived, as busy organizations raised their protests constantly and rooted the anti-slavery mood into the hearts of thousands. Auburn, the home of William H. Seward, was a hive for the Underground as well as a publishing center for Abolitionist literature; it was here that Frederick Douglass' celebrated autobiography was printed. Central New York was the sphere of Seward, Smith and Douglass, of Susan Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton; and a rallying ground for the parliamentary struggle among Eastern anti-slavers.

And at last Rochester, home of Douglass, Susan Anthony, the Porters, the Holleys and other foes of slavery. Rochester was the last big stop on the Underground and from here Harriet and her companions could look back on the whole route. Frederick Douglass, writing about this same series of stations, on what might be called the Harriet Tubman route, has mentioned the names of the more important "forwarders" and it is significant that most of them were Negroes.[9] That is important to understand, for the history of that period, as it has been consciously distorted or incompetently miswritten, has pointed chiefly to white Abolitionists: and that is a one-sided emphasis, for who would have been the most serious workers for freedom if not the Negroes whose own salvation was at stake, and in particular, those developed and leading blacks who were fully aware of the historical importance of their nation in America? The Underground Railroad was the most dangerous front in the

whole conflict, short of the Civil War itself. After all, the people who escaped over the Road, were black. If it is true, as it has been estimated, that more than 50,000 slaves fled from the South to the free states and Canada, then it has to be true that the Negro people, in this situation alone, produced at least 50,000 individual revolutionary acts. And what other people in America up to that time, yes, including even the founding fathers, in their great struggle against Britain, exceeded or equalled such a demonstration of illegal protest?

Sometimes Harriet and her slave collections took shelter inside a Rochester Church. That was the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church at Spring and Favor Streets. Fugitives by the score hid in its pews. "Here also was her spiritual home while in Rochester." [10]

When she didn't put up with Douglass, or Susan Anthony or at the church, it was with the Porters. The Porter family had moved here from Philadelphia, bringing along a Unitarian and an Abolitionist influence. They were hosts to leading Abolitionists and they were also regular receivers of fugitives, including Harriet's groups.[11]

From Rochester the slaves pushed on through several small towns. At Parma they hid in the cellar of a store at Parma Center; they put up at the Milhan House in Williamson, and from here they were smuggled to the docks of the gristmilling town of Pultneyville, where lake captains aided in transporting them thence to Niagara Falls. At the Falls they crossed into Canada over the Suspension Bridge which connected the two countries.

Such was the devious route out of "Egypt" which Harriet traveled. It was a flexible arrangement, and the path she followed was likely to vary with each journey. Any means of locomotion that was available was used, but chiefly the travel was on foot.

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How did Harriet plan her trips? What were her methods, and what kind of a discipline did she exact from her parties? Could anyone at all go north with her? What about her strategy of movement and the question of defensive arms?

Interesting questions, but vital to the safe conduct of her par-

ties. There is a general answer: a situation of such widespread repression against the Negro and his allies naturally called forth a need for such a cautious advance and such a preparedness for defense as that employed in the methods of irregular warfare.

In addition to the fundamental requisites of travel on the Road, such as arming with a pistol or other firearm, and the possession of funds and a knowledge of routes to the North, there were countless tricks of travel, and Harriet was acquainted with most of them. The most elementary knowledge, of course, was to be able to recognize the North Star, for all travel was done at night, and this star was the main reliance. Most conductors knew the trick of looking for moss on the north side of trees, and by this being able to determine a northerly direction. That knowledge was applied on dark nights when the guiding star was beclouded. A favorite resort of Harriet was to arm herself with passes which others wrote out for her. There were escapes by men in female attire, and women dressed like men, and on at least one occasion such a ruse was adopted by Harriet. All of the resorts of an ingenious humanity were used, with no possible avenue and means of escape remaining unexplored.

The Reverend James Freeman Clarke, a white Unitarian minister of New England during that effervescent period when transcendentalism flourished alongside the anti-slavery movement, has related how Harriet planned her work. There were people in the slave states, even slaveholders, who were willing to secrete fugitives if paid enough for doing it, she told him. She once passed an evening at his house and gave an account of her methods. She said she first obtained enough money, then went to Maryland, where she privately collected a party of slaves, and got them ready to start. After satisfying herself that they had enough courage and firmness to run the risks, she next made arrangements so that they should set out on Saturday night, as there would be no opportunity on Sunday for advertising them, and they would thus have one day's start on their way North. Then she had places prepared where she knew they would be protected and taken care of, if she had the money to pay for that protection. Then, said Clarke, when she was at the North, she tried to raise funds until she got a certain amount, and then went

South to carry out this plan. She always paid some colored man to follow after the person who put up the posters advertising the runaways, and pull them down as fast as they were put up, so that about five minutes after each was up it was taken away.[12]

That, of course, is quite general, but it indicates cautious planning.

Another, dramatizing her method, said: "On some darkly propitious night there would be breathed about the Negro quarters of a plantation word that she had come to lead them forth. At midnight she would stand waiting in the depths of woodland or timbered swamp, and stealthily, one by one, her fugitives would creep to the rendezvous. She entrusted her plans to but few of the party, confiding only in one or two of the more intelligent Negroes. She knew her path well by this time, and they followed her unerring guidance without question. She assumed the authority and enforced the discipline of a military despot." [13]

Harriet was the unquestioned leader of her escaping patrols. The attitude was martial, severe. "She could not read or write but she had military genius," it has been said of her.[14] Her sense of army discipline has been shown in the frequent references to her attitude toward traitors in her midst. She was ready to destroy anyone who might renounce or endanger her charges. "She was gentle, kind, and sympathetic, yet quick of action. Always ready to move on the appointed time. Once when she with 25 slaves had lain in a swamp all day until well in the night without food, when the hour came for her to move, one of the men became faint-hearted and wanted to go back, saying that they would die anyway, and he would take his chances back on the old plantation. The others used all their persuasions in their power to have him continue but of no avail. She stepped up to him and aimed a revolver at his head, saying, 'Move or die!' He went on with the rest and in a few days he was in Canada a free man." [15]

Sometimes members of the party became exhausted, footsore, and bleeding, and declared they could not go on; they must stay where they dropped down, and die; others thought a voluntary return to slavery better than being overtaken and carried back, and insisted upon returning. "Then there was no remedy but force; the

revolver carried by this bold and daring pioneer would be pointed at their heads . . .; and so she compelled them to drag their weary limbs on their northward journey." [16]

William Still referred to her sleeping seizures which did not impede her course. The idea of being captured by slave-hunters or slaveholders seemed never to enter her mind, he said. While she manifested such utter personal indifference, she was much more watchful with regard to those she was piloting. Half of the time she had the appearance of one asleep, and would actually sit down by the road-side and go fast asleep when on her "errands of mercy" through the South. "Of course Harriet was supreme, and her followers generally had full faith in her, and would back up any words she might utter. . . . Therefore, none had to die as traitors on the 'middle passage.'" William Still attributed her success in going into Maryland as she did to her "adventurous spirit and utter disregard of consequences. Her like it is probable was never known before or since." [17]

Strong words, these, especially as they come from the man who has left to posterity the most important set of records pertaining to the Underground Railroad. After all, he was at the center of the work; he knew the conductors, the travellers and the station masters. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of fleeing slaves passed through his hands. He was a Negro and he could understand his people better than could Thomas Garrett, Levi Coffin, Oliver Johnson, Gerrit Smith, or any of the other white allies of the fugitive. Finally, when William Still referred to the Underground as the "middle passage" he uttered something that was important in another way, for this phrase covered two centuries of Negro history in America. Originally the term "middle passage" meant the route of the slave by ship, in chains, across the Atlantic, from free Africa to slave America. Now as Still used the expression, it signified a transformation of the concept to mean a passage from Southern bondage to Northern freedom, reversing the old meaning, and representing the beginning of a process to set aright the question of man's subjection by man.

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Harriet employed several stock techniques for various situations.

A few methods were more or less effectually employed on each trip. A favorite ruse, adopted only after several years of experience, was to escape on the first stage of the journey by horse and carriage. Usually this was the master's own property! This tack was sheer daring and was based upon the theory that slaves would not be so bold as to attempt such means. Negroes driving a horse and buggy must certainly be going on an errand for their masters. Usually they drove all night Saturday and all day Sunday before abandoning the horse and buggy. Harriet urged this procedure upon any escaping groups that could arrange to take off this way, pointing to it as an unsuspected means of gaining much distance before search began. "She would put them (the escapees) in a cart covering them with vegetables, and drive them to some hiding place.[18]

Infant fugitives were always handled in the same way—at least by Harriet. The number of children that escaped to the free states was surprisingly large. This is understandable when it is realized that many parents knew that their offspring might be sold as early as they became of use. The separation of parents from their young was one of the most constant crimes of slavery as well as one of its most heartless, and so couples with children invariably thought of escape. Harriet knew that these were the best material for flight: parents would sacrifice for their children and would not weaken.

"I have heard her tell how she carried a ticking bag around her waist," says Helen W. Tatlock who knew Harriet well. "If there were babies to be brought North as often there were she gave them paregoric to stop their crying, and put them in this bag, when near farms or towns, so they might not cry and so attract notice." [19]

Part of the strategy of conducting was, as in all battle-field operations, the knowledge of how and when to retreat. Numerous allusions have been made to her moves when she suspected that she was in danger. When she feared the party was closely pursued, she would take it for a time on a train southward bound. No one seeing Negroes going in this direction would for an instant suppose them to be fugitives.[20] Once on her return she was at a railroad station. She saw some men reading a poster and she heard one of them reading it aloud. It was a description of her, offering a reward for her

capture. She took a southbound train to avert suspicion.[21] At another time when Harriet heard men talking about her, she pretended to read a book which she carried. One man remarked, "This can't be the woman. The one we want can't read or write." Harriet devoutly hoped the book was right side up.[22]

Legend has it that she was discovered by her friends asleep in a local park beneath a sign advertising a reward for her capture, which meant nothing to her, as she could not read.[23] There is an interesting recollection by the late Harriet Stanton Blatch, the white suffragist, which serves to verify this point. "She made my young blood tingle as she told how she sat right under a poster advertising a reward for her capture and return somewhere in the South." [24]

Once on the path, there began the contest between the fugitives and the law. The pursuers started after them. Advertisements were posted everywhere. There was one reward of $12,000 offered for the head of the woman who was constantly appearing and enticing away parties of slaves from their masters.[25]

In the last analysis, it was the exigency of the moment that determined the tactic. Each mile of a journey north presented its new situations, and called forth novel and experimental measures. Harriet and her parties encountered an infinite variety of difficulties and their adventures took ever-varying forms. A few of the fairly complete stories of whole journeys across the Mason-Dixon line show that the various trips differed in countless respects, save only that travel was by night, by guide of the North Star, and there was a general destination under Harriet's lead. That was the cloth, but each trip was woven in a different pattern. Disguise, concealment and maneuvering adapted itself only to the immediate sphere of movement. The blacks peered into the night as far as their eyes could see—and that was as far as they could dare their immediate move. No ruse was impossible if it might save one's life, and there is even related a story about Harriet having to hide fugitives in a manure pile with straws in their mouths to enable them to breathe.[26]

This is the most extreme mention of the defense and desperation related of Harriet's excursions. It sounds as though it is on

the legendary side: but it is not impossible, and, however extreme, the very fact that such an episode can be told, serves to illustrate and symbolize how the "land of the free and the home of the brave" then treated its black Americans.