Chapter IX

THE LOCOMOTIVE OF HISTORY

The locomotive of history was speeding along on the Underground Railroad. Harriet Tubman, piloting her broods northward to a new life, watched John Brown in Kansas, and was amazed at how an old man fought for her people. "Bleeding Kansas," they called it correctly. It had bled since 1854 when pro-slavery men swarmed into the state to settle it for the South and slavery, while anti-slavery Northerners flocked into the territory to make it safe for a free labor-capitalist economy. It all dated back to 1820, to the time when there had been a Missouri Compromise, when the North and South had established a boundary line, the famous Mason and Dixon, north of which there was to be no slavery. But the slavocracy had grown powerful and aggressive, and in May of 1854 there took effect the Kansas-Nebraska bill, a measure which invalidated the Compromise and made it possible for Missouri pro-slavers to rush into Kansas and attempt to seize it for slavery. Up to now the fugitive question, in the center of which was Harriet, had been the sorest spot between the North and South, but this latest attack of the slave power brought the question of the settlement of Kansas to the fore. Then, for the next few years Kansas bled; Abolitionists swept into the state to oppose the inrush of the Missourians; Northern workingmen and farmers who had long been desirous of winning land grants in the West, rushed in alongside the Abolitionists, prepared to keep the Western territories free. Naturally a guerilla warfare opened up, with the anti-slavery forces on the defensive.

That was where John Brown led. He had long been involved in Underground operations, but this was an expanded type of guerilla warfare, and he was expert at it. Around him gathered stalwart young abolitionists and military men. Captain James Montgomery, a brilliant but wildfire type of Abolitionist rallied to the old man's side; James Redpath, journalist and reformer, and dozens of others joined Brown's forces: together, guns blazing, they fought for free-

soilers in Lawrence, Osawatomie, Pottowattomie, wherever pro-slavery men had rooted themselves on free territory, wherever the slave power's hoodlums had attacked an anti-slavery settlement. War in the West, that is what it was, and they called it "the winning of the West"; and the passage of the 'fifties more and more vindicated William H. Seward's prediction of an "irrepressible conflict."

Of course, Kansas was only an issue in the national picture: the question went deeper than that. Kansas, like the Underground Railroad, was only a development of a centuries' old question.

The founding fathers, formulating the Constitution, compromised over the question of slavery, and never even mentioned the word in that famous document. This paved the way for an incessant dispute that broke out around the early part of the Nineteenth Century. At the beginning of the nation, men believed that slavery was limited to the territory in which it then flourished, that it would not spread. But when, in the early 1800's there came a series of inventions that made it possible to produce cotton quickly and cheaply, resulting in an international demand for the goods, the slaveholders rallied around this commodity as their King. But the King, in order to be fed, needed ever newer and more fertile territories, because cotton growing used up the land quickly. These territories were in the West, and as the century advanced the South demanded these regions, resulting in a conflict with the Northern financial interests, with Abolitionists, workers and farmers. The slave power advanced with one aggression after another until at last it pushed into Kansas, hoping to open up the West for the cultivation of its cotton, tobacco and rice fields. Meantime the Southern rulers intensified their bonds with Britain, their largest importer, fought against a high tariff, prevented factories from coming South, and thus kept themselves tightly encased in their slave economy—and fought to expand it.

In the North the financial interests were equally desperate for expansion, but in their case desiring a West in which railroads could be built, modern cities created, factories opened. Northern capital was supported by labor in its drive westward. Northern laborers fought for the Homestead Act, a bill that would give them free land in the West. Small farmers in the North and West feared and

hated the slave power, and wanted their region free of the blight of the plantation economy.

Alongside the struggle for the West, there developed a multitude of differences between the North and the South. The North, engaged in manufacturing, was deprived of the full-sized home market to which it believed itself entitled, due to the lack of buying power in the South, and the Northern industrialists dreamed of a free South in which the Negro and the poor white would buy their products. The North, if it could build a national domestic market, could break free of its dependence upon foreign markets always hard to obtain and harder to hold. Thus the South had bound itself to the present and the past, to a dying economy, and the North was in haste to rush ahead into the new Industrial Revolution that was sweeping the entire Western World.

All along the Mason-Dixon line, as both powers pressed against each other, there was a tremendous tension, and the bonds had burst in Kansas, and the fighting was on. It was Kansas now, and it would be Harper's Ferry later, and then. . . .

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By now the plantations hooked onto each other in a vast chain, not even the State lines breaking their connection, except at the Mason-Dixon border, and they ran from coast to frontier and down along the Gulf of Mexico. Cotton and tobacco, sugar and corn and rice rooted the black millions to this soil. The slave trade had long since passed its climax; the greatest mass of Negroes had been here for generations and a melting pot process had begun to unify their social and economic characteristics. The American slave-mill was grinding to bits the African heritage, little of it remaining except some music and dancing, a few tribal words and an age-old color, but the latter was so important that by now it was turning the United States "upside down." The condition of slavery had made the Negro's relationship to this new earth fundamentally different than his attachment to the African terrain; here they were like oxen, yoked and burdened, and Africa, vast under the sun, free and primitive, was already little more than a tradition and a dim memory.

The white overlords, in creating plantations side by side, in forcing a strange language, a different religion, and alien customs

upon the Negro, had themselves organized a new class, one with which it was engaged in a tremendous battle. By the time when the last tribal legions were smuggled into the land, the Negro character was so broadly evolved that these slave-shipments were assimilated and transformed as rapidly as they arrived. They were swallowed into the maw of the entrenched slave economy and ground immediately into the new, compressed conditions. They were overwhelmed with a different language, and an alien type of wearing apparel was forced upon them. Vital new currents of thinking were pressed upon them by their fellow slaves and by the rule of their white masters, and within a few months they were hardly distinguishable from those whose ancestors had been here a century and more.

Over the plantations there spread an increasingly native culture. There had developed a new and peculiar language—the famous Southern accent, with a transformed English which the King of England at that time might not have understood (and didn't care to understand later when the Civil War broke out, for the British rulers supported the slaveholders); it was a mellow, heavy tongue, r-less and soft, rich and ideal for pulpit, forum and song. The Negro's psychology had become religious; it was a hopeful type of thinking that had more to do with the freeing of the body than of the spirit.

The plantations, like cells in a human body, were knitted together into the bloodstream of a new, a soil-dwelling Negro nation—conceived in slavery, and dedicated to the proposition that some men, those with a certain color of skin, were created without freedom and unequal. But the black man, tilling the soil, extracted from his labor one observation: he beheld that that which has life within it needs freedom if it will survive.

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Of the Abolitionists, Frederick Douglass did as much or more than any other, white or Negro, to the advancement of the Republican Party, and therefore, to the ending of chattel slavery. He was a Republican while Abraham Lincoln was still trying to find himself. When the Presidential campaign of 1856 was under way, Douglass came in for much criticism by the Abolitionists who were less far-

seeing than himself. He endorsed John C. Fremont for President on the newly founded Republican Party ticket. This party had grown out of a long series of organizational transformations throughout the North and West. The Liberty Party had come and gone, and this had been followed by the Free-Soilers. Meanwhile the Whigs and Democrats, the chief parties, had been developing progressive, or anti-slavery wings which split away at the time the Kansas controversy broke, until at last there appeared in 1856 a fusion of parties that became the Republican Party. It was still weak, of course, but Douglass, who had helped build this alliance, knew that this was the party, that the years of Abolitionist organization had to be crystallized into this big, broad liberal onslaught. Once, in September of 1856, after he was bitterly attacked for his views, he took occasion to express his conception of political strategy, and in this statement can be seen the genius of the true political organizer, the one who knows how to fight on all fronts, to utilize all avenues of advance. "From our political philosophy, we are at liberty to consider the state of the public mind, and to look at immediate results, as well as remote consequences. We are at liberty to inquire how far our vote, at a given time, will forward what we conceive to be the highest interests of society; and having considered this, we are at liberty,—nay, it is our indispensable duty to cast our vote in that direction, which, upon a survey of the whole facts in the case, will largest promote that great end." [1]

It was the radicals of the National Abolition Society, guided by that strategy, who were doing the work which, historically, proved to be decisive. It was this group which, more than any other, welded the progressive sections of the severing parties into the movement that was becoming the Republican Party, the party that would vanquish slavery. Gerrit Smith was a leader of this movement, and a close associate of Douglass, as well as a heavy financial contributor to *Frederick Douglass' Paper.* The newspaper was a real organizing weapon; it was carefully read by most political leaders in the nation, and the policies of its writers were digested and often translated into the political life of the North. The leadership of the established parties knew that it was the criticism of Douglass—not Garrison—that was moulding the most far-reaching political consequences; they

knew that the moral indignation of Garrison was instrumental mainly as an educational force.

Sometime in this period Douglass and William H. Seward developed a close relationship; and later, in 1860, the Negro liberator endorsed Seward for President. Although Seward's nomination did not mature, it does not minimize the importance of the relationship between the National Abolition Society and the wildfire growth of the Republicans.

James McCune Smith, a profound Negro critic and organizer, was associated with Douglass in the ranks of the National Abolitionists. Others, white, supported the Negro champion and acknowledged his critical and intellectual superiority. A. Pryne, an editorial associate of Douglass, who, in 1858, had a famous debate with a Southerner, W. G. ("Parson") Brownlow, publicly acknowledged the superior leadership of the black man. Other principal spirits of this society, S. S. Jocelyn, L. L. Matlock, A. G. Beman and William Goodell may not have achieved the public acclaim that went to Wendell Phillips, Garrison and other New England dis-unionists, but they were busy in behind-the-scenes work, knitting together the united front that became known as the Republican Party. Today, almost a century later, we can look back upon that period when the Abolitionists struggled for an effective policy and it is evident that it was the Douglass wing of Abolition that was most instrumental in bringing to an issue the question of slave labor versus free labor. Thus Republican wealth and power today can, in considerable measure, trace its origin back to the philosophical brilliance of a Negro born a slave.[2]

Harriet Tubman more and more saw the scene in the Douglass view, of utilizing all allies, of advancing step by step, by large and by small measures. Her developing friendship in this period with William H. Seward, whose home in Auburn, New York, housed her fugitive broods, is the best testament of this fact. The needs of a great principle called for a flexible strategy. It was this realization that enabled Harriet to work first on the Underground, later to side in with John Brown in an attempt and experiment at insurrection, to support Garrison and his school for their moral vigor and effect, to endorse and speak for women's suffrage (always primarily a white

women's movement), and finally to rely a deep faith in liberal and radical parliamentarians like Seward, Sumner, Hale, Chase, and others, for these, she saw, had the power of government to enforce their views—and if they had full power, a dozen parliamentarians, fighting on the floor of the Senate, could do more than a hundred Abolitionist meetings or a thousand anti-slavery speeches. There was nothing sectarian or dogmatic about Harriet, save her love for liberty. True, the Underground Railroad remained her prime love, at least until 1858 when she acquired an equal devotion to the aims of John Brown, but she beheld a wheel with many spokes and she knew that the wheel could not turn unless all spokes turned with it: and she was at the hub, connected with all the spokes of the anti-slavery wheel of history.