PART THREE

CAPTAIN JOHN BROWN AND "THE WOMAN"

CHAPTER XII

"THE MOST OF A MAN"

For several years John Brown had been battling in Kansas, until at last in the winter of 1857 he lost patience with the "peace" that prevailed in that territory and he veered his plans toward his long-dreamed-of conspiracy in the Virginia country. Kansas was not yet a free state, nor was it wholly in the hands of pro-slavers; the issue was simply not yet decided. But the struggle to make the region free had whetted Brown's appetite, confirmed his faith in the power of guerilla warfare, strengthened his hand with the wealthier Eastern anti-slavers; and a pack of vigorous young men had rallied to his side.

The genius of John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, lay in the fact that it combined in a single gesture most of the important political and economic features of that period, and it occurred at a time when it could have and did have the most possible effect on North-South relations. If it failed in its grand purpose, that of making good an insurrection which would liberate the slave and result in the establishment of a Provisional Government, which, in turn, would reconstruct the United States, then it succeeded in the political realm out of all proportion to the military debacle. The conspiracy utilized important political elements of that period, such as the need for black and white collaboration in the face of a com-

mon enemy, the resources of the Underground Railroad, insurrectionary theory (especially the experience of previous American revolts), and Christian zeal or the moral right of the Negro to freedom. In case the revolution failed—for a plan of revolution is exactly what it was—it was calculated to have a secondary, and an almost as desirable effect, the deflation of the slave's economic value.

With his revolutionary idea in mind, John Brown went east to New England in the Spring of 1858, to win the support of the men who had financed the free state campaign in Kansas. Among the more important persons whose aid was enlisted were those two wealthy anti-slavers, George Stearns and Samuel G. Howe of Boston; the Negro organizer, Lewis Hayden; the Reverend Thomas W. Higginson of Worcester, Massachusetts and Franklin B. Sanborn of Concord. These, probably the most daring male Abolitionists, excepting those who had already shouldered arms in Kansas or had run the gauntlet of the Underground Railroad, knew that at last the hoped-for movement to end slavery had a leader, and that the deed was in motion.

After making his contacts in New England, Brown turned into New York State. Gerrit Smith, whom he had seen in March of 1858 at Peterboro, was an important source for money and moral support; and it was through Smith that Brown now established his first connection with Harriet Tubman. Brown had long been curious to meet her. From hearsay he had pictured her as a vigorous and military personality. Since he planned to use the resources of the Underground Railroad, he believed Harriet could help out because of her knowledge of that system. The Underground was heavily entrenched in the Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania region, and if slaves rallied to his side they would have the assistance of the station masters, white and Negro. The Road would provide supplies; the Negroes, those who might become liberated in the Virginia region as a result of his revolt, could reach the station masters. Many who would not want to stay to fight in a warring South could be sent on to the North. The Underground Railroad would thus be a factor in numerous ways during the deliverance of the

slaves. And who knew the Underground Railroad in the East better than Harriet Tubman?

When Brown visited Gerrit Smith's Peterboro home, the philanthropist gave him the funds to make a trip to St. Catharines, Canada,[1] and he also gave the Kansas warrior a check for twenty-five dollars, to be delivered to Harriet when Brown should meet her. That was the rich reformer's way of recommending Harriet.

Brown hastened on to Rochester to tell Frederick Douglass that he was making ready to enter the Virginia country, and to urge that now was the time to back up the plan. Whatever discussions occurred there, the most important result was Brown's decision to go to Canada and meet Harriet. She, he hoped, would be able to supply recruits for his liberation army from among her freed following in Canada. Douglass too had urged upon him an immediate interview with Harriet.

J. W. Loguen, the Negro minister and Abolitionist, of Syracuse, was in Rochester visiting Douglass at the time, and it was arranged that he should accompany Brown to St. Catharines and bring him together with Harriet. It was about April 4th or 5th of 1858 when Loguen and Brown went to the British dominion. Harriet was temporarily living there, although her more permanent home was already established in Auburn.[2]

One report has it that Harriet asked Brown to come to her home.[3] Whether or not that was true, Harriet was presently entrusted with the secret of the Virginia plan. By the time Loguen brought them together, Brown was prepared to meet an extraordinary creature. When he first set eyes on her he said, "The first I see is General Tubman, the second is General Tubman and the third is General Tubman." [4]

Brown wrote a letter a few days later to his son, John Brown, Jr., revealing that Harriet more than measured up to his expectations. He was virtually rapturous, and he was not a man given to the use of superlatives. He found it necessary to continue "masculinizing" Harriet in order to convey his estimate of her qualities for leadership. He wrote:

"I came here direct with J. W. Loguen the day after you

left Rochester. I am succeeding to all appearance, beyond my expectation. Harriet Tubman hooked on his whole team at once. He is the most of a man, naturally, that I ever met with. There is the most abundant material, and of the right quality, in this quarter, beyond all doubt. . . ." [5]

Whatever information of possible military resource Harriet had, she passed on to John Brown. She told him what she knew of the aid that would be forthcoming from the Underground Railroad in the East, gave him additional information about the terrain in which Brown expected to operate and promised to bring to his side her own personal following of fugitives in Canada West. Brown painted a picture of what might happen in the Virginia country once that hostilities opened up and explained that he had a special job for her at that time. He hoped she would be a chief guide to the North of the slaves he freed in the neighborhood of Harper's Ferry.[6]

In short, she was Brown's main reliance in Canada, his key to the fugitives and their various capacities for support.

"God's Angry Man," as Brown has been called, was still in St. Catharines on April 14th, and on that day, according to an entry in his diary, he paid Harriet Tubman in gold for Gerrit Smith's draft of twenty-five dollars.[7] By that time she was fully conversant with his plans, and he could now leave Canada and take up organizational problems elsewhere. He saw Harriet several times; he met many Negro allies through her, and he saw the advantage of calling a convention here to complete the organization of his army and his liberation plans. Before he left, he again called her General Tubman three times and informed her that she would hear from him through Douglass.[8]

While Brown was absent in Chicago for a few weeks, Harriet busied herself among the ex-slaves, seeking recruits to fight at the old man's side. The conspiracy went ahead rapidly, for Harriet and others in Canada were mobilizing a large number of blacks for an early meeting with Brown. Harriet was aided by Martin R. Delany, a prominent Negro critic and Abolitionist, in the selection of able men of color for service with Brown.

John Brown's intimates, those who had fought with him in Kansas and a few others that he had more recently taken into his confidence, clung together in small groups in Canada, in New England, in Central New York, in the far West, and they buzzed and rumored of the impending event. By now perhaps two score knew that a plan of revolution was fomenting. There was, especially in Canada West, since Brown made his visit to Harriet, a furtive, underground whispering. This atmosphere has been described by William Ellery Channing in a narrative poem, "John Brown," written many years after the Harper's Ferry explosion. Channing, describing a meeting in a house on the outskirts of Chatham, Canada, began his one hundred and forty-three-page drama with a scene of Harriet, Stevens, and John Brown in conversation. Stevens, a soldier with an extensive military background, was third in command of the Harper's Ferry expedition.

Harriet opens the conversation by asserting her profound interest in the conspiracy. Stevens replies, not doubting her hearty cooperation, and he avers his own staunch sentiments. Many or one, he says, be it even himself alone, he will take the road that goes to free her people. No more talk for him. . . .

For me I should not dare to live, and feel
More like a slave than now!

to which Harriet replies:

My people are unversed in strife and arms;
Peace ever is the music of their hearts;
And, long crushed down, even those who, with us now
Sit under their own vine, dream but of rest.
What think you of the meeting?

That is a reference to the forthcoming Chatham Convention. Stevens says that the men must meet, must prepare to set up a Provisional Government; and he compares the event to Christ's last meeting with his disciples.

HARRIET. *I have persuaded four to join your band.*
STEVENS. *Four? One is an army in this cause!*

Harriet introduces the question of the risks of the campaign (one

that, in reality, she never raised, according to any evidence.) Stevens cautions her to silence lest they be overheard and betrayed. Harriet calms him, and again predicts that the raid contemplated by the small band is doomed to failure. The soldier replies that, *"Someone must perish,"*—and he then speaks of the fortitude of old John Brown. At this point Brown enters, and addressing himself to Harriet, delivers himself of a conception of the Negro nation in freedom:

> *Harriet! We seldom can make sweet your days.*
> *The woman's heart is aching for its race.*
> *Their fate is hazardous, yet fear it not,—*
> *The sword of Gideon in our hands is set.*
> *Think of the men who till the wide-spread fields,*
> *Lands rolling o'er a continent,*
> *And every brother of the outspread race*
> *Waiting to clasp a brother to his breast.*
> HARRIET. *There is a pulse in that!* [9]

The poem continues, introducing John Cook, John Henry Kagi and others, unfolding the entire story of Harper's Ferry. As Channing has supposed, there were such conferences at houses in St. Catharines, Chatham and other places in Canada West. Harriet and others attended them and they discussed the hazards, the morale, the backing of the anti-slavers, and theorized about the possibilities of military success or failure. Channing advanced one line, in effect that Harriet had persuaded four to join Brown's band. The poet based his work on the various published accounts of the raid, and he may have known of this as a fact.[10] He was an intimate of Emerson, Thoreau, Sanborn and other Concord Abolitionists.

When the Chatham Convention opened in the second week of May, John Brown was chosen Commander in Chief, and John Henry Kagi, War Secretary. There was discussion on the Provisional Constitution and it was adopted. The "sword of Gideon" was indeed set by now, and had it not been for the development of a treasonable situation, Brown would have led his men to Virginia at about this time. Hugh Forbes, a military man and adventurer, who had fought with Garibaldi in Italy, had been for a short time in Brown's

company. He revealed the plan to Senator Hugh Wilson. As a result, it was necessary to postpone the invasion of Virginia.

The movement that had grown to a considerable peak in May of 1858 simmered out in the succeeding months, and made necessary a postponement of the action until the year 1859. With the lapse of time, many of the followers vacillated, and the waning of interest at this point may have been fatal to the military success of the engagement when it finally did occur. Certainly Harriet was in a position to exert her fullest influence in the spring of 1858, when the plan was fresh to the fugitives, when they had neither time to develop doubts, nor time to enter into new engagements.[11]