Chapter XIII

HARRIET TUBMAN HEADS FOR HARPER'S FERRY

With operations indefinitely delayed Harriet decided to return to Auburn for the remainder of the fall. Here she had the responsibilities of a house to be paid for and her parents to be supported.

All through the autumn months she labored in the home town, but retained contact with her fellow conspirators.

By the time the snows fell she was restless with her domestic obligations, and she feared that these concerns might root her here permanently and prevent further Abolition labors. She decided to go to Boston, raise funds to pay for the property she bought from Seward, and plunge renewedly into the work.

That is what happened: she went to Boston, met John Brown who was then there, and managed to secure enough money to take care of the house, at least for a time. "Pains were taken to secure her the attention to which her great services to humanity entiled her," said Frank Sanborn, "and she left New England with a handsome sum of money towards the payment of her debt to Mr. Seward. Before she left, however, she had several interviews with Captain Brown, then in Boston. . . . He always spoke of her with the greatest respect, and declared that 'General Tubman,' as he styled her, was a better officer than most whom he had seen, and could command an army as successfully as she had led her small parties of fugitives." [1]

This is verified by Wendell Phillips, for the last time that he saw John Brown alive was the first day that he met Harriet—and that would be a memorable event in the life of any Abolitionist leader. Phillips said, "The last time I ever saw John Brown was under my own roof, as he brought Harriet Tubman to me, saying, 'Mr. Phillips, I bring you one of the best and bravest persons on this continent—*General* Tubman, as we call her.' "

Brown then went on to recount her labors and sacrifices in behalf of her people. After that, said Phillips, Harriet spent some

time in Boston, earning the confidence and admiration of all those who were working for freedom.[2]

Hence, whatever the state of John Brown's affairs in the mid-winter period Harriet was acquainted with them.

With money in her possession to mitigate some of her debt to Seward, Harriet returned to Auburn. But she did not long remain there. She was anxious to return to New England in order to do "missionary" work for Brown: to win the support of prominent anti-slavers and to find recruits from among the host of young Abolitionists, white and Negro, who swarmed in Massachusetts.

From some indefinite date in the spring of 1859 through to the insurrection Harriet was in New England. During that time she was out of touch with the crucial Canada West quarter. She passed time with Smith at Peterboro, Higginson at Worcester, spoke publicly at Framingham, visited friends in Boston and Concord, and latterly stayed in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in ill health. It was a period when she could have lost touch with Brown's week to week movements.

Meantime her absence from Canada was taking its toll: the fugitives, those who had promised to bear arms at Harper's Ferry, were losing touch with the Brown conspiracy, and indeed, many of them may have believed it to have been abandoned.

It was early spring, when the conspirators' spirits were at low ebb, when the New England colleagues were writing long introspective letters to each other, bemoaning the slow estate of the plan, that Brown was working hardest and making ready to "take the field."

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Harriet rarely if ever made a trip eastward without stopping to see Gerrit Smith, and it is from a letter written on June 1st by a young musician named Edwin Morton, an inmate of Smith's home, tutor of young Greene Smith, that we learn of her presence there sometime earlier. Probably it was a mere halt before she headed for her destination, New England. Young Morton, a Harvard classmate of Sanborn, who knew of the plot, wrote a letter to Sanborn which indicated with some finality, what the plan then was. ". . . I suppose you know where this matter is to be adjudicated. Harriet

Tubman suggested the 4th of July as a good time to 'raise the mill.' "

That letter is evidence that Harriet's proposal of July 4th as a striking day was seriously considered by Brown, that he may even have heard it directly from her. Brown was in Peterboro visiting with Smith in the month of April. He had also met Shields Green, a Negro protegé of Frederick Douglass, in Rochester, during the same month. It would be strange if, during that period in New York State, he had not seen Harriet, on whom he counted for so much. There had been a meeting at Peterboro, attended apparently by Harriet, Gerrit Smith, Morton, and possibly John Brown. Harriet had suggested July 4th as a desirable day for the beginning of the stratagem. The symbolism of the hour appealed to her, and she saw no argument against opening the hostilities in the hot weather when the authorities might be slowed up by the heat.

Meantime John Brown was in touch with Sanborn about the problem of getting soldier recruits. The old man wanted Sanborn or someone else to go to Canada with Harriet to get them. The Concord Abolitionist wrote to his friend Higginson at Worcester, on May 30, mentioning Harriet, and seeking the minister's speedy co-operation:

> "He (Brown) is desirous of getting someone to go to Canada and collect recruits, with H. Tubman, or alone as the case may be & urged me to go but my school will not let me. Last year he engaged some persons and heard of others, but he does not want to lose time by going there himself now. I suggested you to him. Now is the time to help in the movement, if ever, for within the next two months the experiment will be made." [3]

There was no issue of Sanborn's plea to Higginson to make a recruiting expedition to Canada, with or without Harriet. Whatever Higginson's reason, he did not go.

By June 20, 1859 Brown "was already mustering his men and moving his arms toward Virginia, and it was about the Fourth of July, as Harriet Tubman had suggested, that Brown first showed himself in the counties of Washington and Jefferson, on opposite sides of the lordly Potomac.

"He needed now only recruits to serve with him and for these he relied on Tubman and the fugitives she had brought north with her." [4]

Only recruits. Only the most important thing of all, the men. And Harriet was the key to this.

It was too early for Brown to strike on the 4th of July. Not nearly enough preparation had been made. As late as July 3rd Brown made his first appearance in the vicinity of Harper's Ferry. After looking over the region he rented the Kennedy farm, near Harper's Ferry, as his headquarters; and at about that time, John H. Kagi, Brown's righthand man, was stationed at Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, as a liaison representative with the Northern backers. In spite of the year of delays, and even the slow movement and disappointments now, John Brown's general plan advanced. The treasonable Hugh Forbes was no longer a problem; and the morale of the financial backers was reawakening.

Early in August, John Brown, Jr., stationed in Ohio, undertook an important task in relation to the full development of the campaign. He was now the old man's chief representative in the North. He was designated to go east from Ohio on a "Northern tour," to round up recruits, gather additional funds, and test all the lines of contact. On August 11, young Brown, writing from Syracuse, informed Kagi at Chambersburg that he had seen Frederick Douglass and that the Negro leader would arrive there in a few days, that he would be accompanied by a Negro recruit for the campaign, Shields Green, and that if Harriet Tubman could be located, she would go along too. "Came on here (to Syracuse) this morning," he wrote. "Found L. (Loguen) gone to Boston, Massachusetts, and also said woman (Harriet)." In spite of extra expense he intended going on to Boston to find Loguen and "the woman." Frederick Douglass had urged this step upon him saying that Harriet's services might prove invaluable.

Arriving in Boston, John Brown, Jr., met everyone but "the woman." He had his first meeting with Dr. Samuel G. Howe and other staunch friends of his father. Consulting with them about what to do on the highly important question of going to Canada to

get recruits, he was advised to have Loguen accompany him on his journey northward.[5]

Thus, months late, perhaps months too late, the matter of the Canadian fugitives was being taken care of; but from the time when the unavailability of Harriet as a Canadian recruiting agent was established, the whole question of fighters remained unresolved.

Harriet's location was unknown for several weeks or more, at the time Brown Jr. was looking for her. She was then in New Bedford, ill. Late in August Frank Sanborn, then in Springfield, Massachusetts, wrote to John Brown, reporting Harriet's whereabouts and illness. This letter, like the aforementioned John Brown Jr. letter to Kagi, was confiscated by the authorities at Kennedy Farm during the uprising, and eventually printed in the Senate Committee Report Investigating the Harper's Ferry Invasion. The schoolmaster's reference to Harriet read, "Harriet Tubman is probably in New Bedford, sick. She has staid here in N. E. a long time, and been a kind of missionary." [6]

Over-exertion in her Abolition labors, the years of toil on the Underground Railroad, and the intervals of hard domestic labor to maintain herself and her parents, had struck Harriet. Chronic illness was almost "natural" to her; she still suffered intensely from that bruise of slavery which left her with frequent visits of temporary unconsciousness. But now her illness was in a stage of general crisis; she was seriously weakened and abed.

In spite of her illness there was another attempt, this time by Lewis Hayden, to bring her into the operations. This was only a few weeks before the raid occurred. Lewis Hayden knew where Harriet was and he wrote to her, but he seemed to be unaware of her weakened physical condition, according to a letter that he sent to Kagi at Chambersburg. *The New York Herald,* which was violently opposed to Abolition, and subsequently wrote of the Brown campaign with a view to exposing its origins, remarked that "Harriet Tubman was not in good health and had been spending some time in a small New England town." [7] It then printed the Hayden letter, dated Boston, September 16, 1859:

My dear sir:—

I received your very kind letter, and would state that I have

sent a note to Harriet requesting her to come to Boston, saying to her in the note that she must come right on, which I think she will do, and when she does come I think we will find some way to send her on. I have seen our friend at Concord (Frank Sanborn); he is a true man. I have not yet said anything to anybody except him. I do not think it is wise for me to do so. I shall, therefore, when Harriet comes, send for our Concord friend, who will attend to the matter. Have you all the hands you wish? Write soon.

Yours,

L. H.

That is an important letter, for it reveals how the Negro leaders, first Douglass, and later Hayden, looked to Harriet for leadership. It reveals that Chambersburg and Harper's Ferry were still requisitioning her, even though Sanborn had informed Brown two weeks earlier that she was in bad health. It was the plan of Hayden to send for Sanborn when Harriet arrived in Boston, and the schoolmaster's job was to provide funds to send her to the front.

That was John Brown's hope. Indeed, it was his last hope in the way of having a reliable Negro leader at his side when the gunfire would begin. A few weeks earlier when the Old Man met Frederick Douglass at Chambersburg, the Negro declared that he did not believe it sensible to bear arms himself at Harper's Ferry. The man of color foresaw the military failure with the same clarity as he understood most political situations in his own time. The Old Man badly wanted a colored leader at his side to rally the slaves: he wanted someone who could command, speak, and bear arms. From the time Douglass withdrew, the Old Man concentrated his efforts upon having Harriet with him. Thus, the hunt for "the woman" went on, and now, according to Hayden, there was a ray of hope that the little black conductor might be available. And she was . . . but too late.

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John Brown would delay no longer. Fearing new obstacles, suspecting more treason, perceiving the lateness of the year, and real-

izing that he himself was growing old, he hastened his date with destiny, and on the night of October 16, 1859, history was made. The men struck, seized the important Federal arsenal, the bridges, the town of Harper's Ferry itself.

Franklin B. Sanborn says that Harriet was in New York City at that time,[8] which means that she was at last started on the way. The eminent Negro historian, W. E. B. Dubois, said, "Only sickness, brought on by her toil and exposure prevented Harriet from being present at Harper's Ferry." [9]

The loss of "the woman" to the cause, both in person and in the recruits she could have mustered had she been able to travel earlier, was a severe blow to the plan.

If Brown did not have with him Douglass or Tubman, he did have five other Negroes: slave-born Shields Green, who was captured in the engine house with the Old Man; Dangerfield Newby, first of the band to die in the struggle, for he was in the thick of it at the armory gate; John A. Copeland, who lived through the affray only to die on the gallows later; Lewis Leary, mortally wounded on October 17th and dying in agony; and Osborne Perry Anderson, who skirmished with the militia, fought to hold the arsenal, and managed to escape, being one of the five who did.

Of course, the story of the other sixteen white men who fought, died, hanged, or escaped, is to this day one of the most oft-told tales of American history. The episode snowballed into as large a political factor as anything which the Abolitionists had as yet achieved. If Brown and his men did not alone liberate the slave—and no single person or group did—then at least they struck a telling blow. The Old Man's military stroke miscarried, but an even greater political debacle was engineered by Governor Wise of Virginia when he hanged John Brown.

The impress of the affair never left Harriet Tubman's mind, never so long as she lived, and a generation later she wanted to name her own Home for the Aged and Indigent after John Brown. She never ceased to talk of the Old Man, and always referred to him as the true emancipator of her people. Harriet believed all of the days of her life, that it was not Lincoln who was the Negro's vindicator —not really Lincoln who hedged and vacillated in the war days—

but John Brown—there was the white man whom the Negro would forever remember!

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As to Harriet's part in the Harper's Ferry invasion: while we must acknowledge the superior critical faculties of Douglass, and admit that he saw correctly the military failure of the plan, we cannot help but admire Harriet for her unmitigated fortitude, nor can we forget that one of Boston's leading Negro fighters, Lewis Hayden, and other Abolitionists, made a profound effort to send on, into blazing gunfire, the little black woman. More, to those who search for a principle or meaning in Harriet's relationship to Brown: she gave sanction and association to conspiracy and insurrection when she believed that these methods were necessary to the freedom of her people.

Brown found a personal inspiration in Harriet which few other living persons aroused in him. The highest expressions of admiration from him for another human being were spent upon her. She was "the woman" in whom he placed an implicit trust, the one person he admired above all other Abolitionists—"The General."

Great women's names have come out of that period, but they are not to be found mentioned in the pre-invasion days of Harper's Ferry. In the post-invasion period the five-foot high colored woman, with several front teeth missing, the wooly hair, and the sleepy eyes —she who was on her way to join the white-bearded deliverer, dropped from sight; and then the "great names" of the land were heard. When John Brown lay in jail, Lydia Maria Child offered to come to Charlestown Jail and be his nurse, and other articulate white women in the North flooded him with letters—and hoped for his replies. Lydia Child had been one of the most admired writers, but Brown already had a long association with Harriet and he happened not to have known Mrs. Child.

Harriet had functioned so deeply under cover that she was not revealed until months later. First the *New York Herald* indicated Harriet's complicity; then in 1860 she was mentioned again in the Report of the Senate Committee Investigating the Harper's Ferry Invasion. Within a year, it was common knowledge in the ranks of Abolition and among the New England and New York State woman

suffragists that Harriet had been Brown's conspirator for a long time. Only time has revealed how fully they collaborated.

Her presence alongside Brown is not only a score for Negro history, but it is a chapter in woman's annals, a role in "the woman's history of the world." Harriet had pioneered for her sex as well as for the Negro nation.