

## CHAPTER VII

### GUERRILLA WARFARE IN THE MID-'FIFTIES

"Go down, Moses."

The intensive work continued on into the mid-fifties, when men aided the slave or fought him. Who was the man, woman or child that had not a concern for the Negro? Either to defend or attack him? By now there were but few who were neutral. The profound historian, the giant poet, the schoolboy, the humble slave—all; and Harriet touched upon each.

It was about this time when Samuel J. May, white Abolitionist and historian, had need for the services of Harriet, but not knowing her as yet, his efforts to free a certain slave failed. The historian, in his volume published after the Civil War,<sup>1</sup> referred to a fugitive case that had much impressed him. He described how a colored man had appealed to him for help in bringing North his aged mother. May's attempts to achieve the woman's freedom by purchase, paying three hundred dollars, failed. He concluded his several-page account with the observation—a considerable tribute to Harriet, "I did not, until five years afterward, become acquainted with that remarkable woman, Harriet Tubman, or I might have engaged her services in the assurance that she would have brought off the old woman without *paying* for what belonged to her by an inalienable right—*her liberty*." It was in the very late fifties when May finally met the conductor.

The poet of democracy, Walt Whitman, was heart and soul with the fugitive, too, for the bard, as appears in his "Leaves of Grass" well understood the black man's plight. The runaway slave had come to his house "limpsy and weak" and he went where the Negro sat and led him in and assured him,

"And brought water and filled a tub for his sweated  
body and bruis'd feet."

The fugitive stayed a week before he was recuperated and passed North, and meantime Whitman "had him sit next me at table, my fire-lock lean'd in the corner."

Whether truth or poetry, Whitman did not over-portray the "limpsy and weak" fugitive. The "bruis'd feet" were Harriet's *most* of the time. Usually Thomas Garrett, who was in the shoe business, provided her with footgear. She could wear out shoes in a single trip North, and she needed a new pair every few months. Once she was helped in this way by Gerrit Smith's son, Greene Smith. "I remember," she said, "once after I had brought some colored people from the South, I went up to Peterboro to the Big House. Gerrit Smith's son, Greene, was going hunting with his tutor and some other boys. I had no shoes. It was on Saturday afternoon and—would you believe it?—those boys went right off to the village and got me a pair of shoes so I could go with them." <sup>2</sup> Thus the spirit of Abolitionism had spread until "the schoolboy of twelve" in the North could delay even the joys of a hunting trip to help an ex-slave woman, and then to have her go with them.

That is one of the few glimpses of a light moment in Harriet's days in the pre-Civil War period. Harriet going hunting! She, who packed a gun on her night jaunts, must have been a good shot, able to teach Greene Smith and his friends a few things about how to stalk out in the open country.

But for one such incident as this there are a score of incidents more grim than happy. Sometime in this period Harriet and one of her parties were about thirty miles below Wilmington. This was in the rigorous Smyrna (Delaware) district, where white patrols were incessantly vigilant for fugitives. It was March and "she had two stout men with her." Harriet, sensing the possibility of danger on the road through which they were escaping, decided to veer her course. The party left the highway, and took off through an open field until they came to a small stream of water. It was probably a branch of the Chester River which flowed through this region; there was no bridge and no boat, and there was no alternative but to cross it.

". . . She went in," says Thomas Garrett, "the water came up to her armpits; the men refused to follow till they saw her safe on the opposite shore. Then they followed, and if I mistake not she had soon to wade a second stream; soon after which she came to a cabin of colored people, who took them all in, put them to bed, and

dried their clothes, ready to proceed next night on their journey.

"Harriet had run out of money, and gave them some of her under-clothing to pay for their kindness. When she called on me two days after she was so hoarse she could hardly speak, and was also suffering with violent toothache." <sup>3</sup>

If that was an example of Harriet's fortitude, there was another incident, belonging also to this period, when her resourcefulness was forcibly shown. In this incident there was revealed her mature talent for acting. Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson never ceased to marvel over her facility as an actress and an entertainer. In his famous letter in which he called Harriet "the greatest heroine of the age" <sup>4</sup> he mentioned her ability to act, and he spoke another time of her as a wonderful comedian. <sup>5</sup> Harriet was fonder of the present episode than most others which befell her. "One of her masterly accomplishments . . . was the impression of a decrepit old woman. On one of her expeditions . . . she had the incredible nerve to enter a village where lived one of her former masters. This was necessary for the carrying out of her plans for that trip. Her only disguise was a bodily assumption of age. To reinforce this her subtle foresight prompted her to buy some live chickens, which she carried suspended by the legs from a cord. As she turned a corner she saw coming toward her none other than her old master. Lest he might see through her impersonation and to make an excuse for flight, she loosed the cord that held the fowls and amid the laughter of the bystanders, gave chase to them as they flew squawking over a nearby fence." <sup>6</sup>

In the mid-'fifties there were a number of cases of escapes by women who disguised themselves as men. The most famous instance was the flight of Ellen Craft who dressed herself as a young master, (she was very light and could do this), and escaped with her husband who played the part of her body-servant. Maria Weems, a Negro girl, dressed like a man in 1855 and made good a flight. Perhaps it was these and other successes that prompted Harriet to allow her brother's sweetheart to escape in that manner. In any case, such a mask was adopted by a girl named Catherine, the friend of Harriet's brother, William Henry Ross. ". . . William Henry had long been attached to a girl named Catherine, who lived with

another master; but her master would not let her marry him. When William Henry made up his mind to start with Harriet, he determined to bring Catherine with him. And so he went to a tailor's, and bought a new suit of men's clothes, and threw them over the garden fence of Catherine's master. The garden ran down to a run, and Catherine had been notified where to find the clothes.

"When the time had come to get ready, Catherine went to the foot of the garden and dressed herself in the suit of men's clothes. She was soon missed, and all the girls in the house were set to looking for Catherine. Presently they saw coming up through the garden, as if from the river, a well-dressed little Negro, and they all stopped looking for Catherine to stare at him. He walked directly by them round the house, and went out of the gate, without the slightest suspicion being as to who he was. In a fortnight from that time, the whole party was safe in Canada." 7

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Harriet first appeared in Boston in 1854, according to the Negro historian, William Wells Brown.<sup>8</sup> For some time she attended anti-slavery events without taking a prominent part in them, without yet making her appearance as a public speaker. "For eight or ten years previous to the breaking out of the Rebellion," Brown wrote, "all who frequented anti-slavery conventions, lectures, picnics, and fairs, could not fail to have seen a black woman of medium size, upper front teeth gone, smiling countenance, attired in coarse, but neat apparel, with an old-fashioned reticule or bag suspended by her side, and who, on taking her seat, would at once drop off into a sound sleep."

That is one of the few physical descriptions of Harriet during the middle period of the Underground years. Brown went on to say that she was soon a welcome visitor at the homes of the leading Abolitionists who were always attentive listeners to her strange and eventful stories. Despite her lack of education the most polished persons would sit and listen to her as she recounted, in the simplest manner, the incidents of her life, always seasoned with good sense. The historian said that while she was in Boston she made several trips to the South and it was these that resulted in her receiving the

cognomen, "Moses." Actually she had received that name from the Negroes in Maryland several years earlier. "Men from Canada, who had made their escape years before, and whose families were still in the prison-house of slavery, would seek out Moses, and get her to go and bring their dear ones away. How strange! This woman—one of the most ordinary looking of her race; unlettered; no idea of geography, asleep half of the time. . . . No fugitive was ever captured who had Moses for a leader." <sup>9</sup>

Despite Boston's important role in Abolition, and Harriet's early appearance there, this was not yet her significant background. Mainly she was a "world-traveler," passing constantly from the world of slavery to that of freedom, and living for brief periods in St. Catharines, Canada, with the members of her family whom she had rescued. Harriet, a restless agitator, found her way about to other Canadian cities and towns, Chatham, Toronto, Vernon Center, wherever there was something doing, wherever a meeting was being held or some committee work needed, or a helping hand for some fugitive just in from the distant South. Canada West was virgin territory, and the fugitives had the pioneer task of clearing the land for cultivation. The women kept house and sometimes worked out. Even Harriet took a few months of work whenever the opportunity presented itself, although by now she was regarded virtually a professional on the railway to freedom.

It was by no means all socially smooth sailing in the Canadian West towns. Although the Negro was legally free here, and although generally an open mind prevailed, there was some prejudice, and many whites remained firmly dissociated from their colored neighbors. By 1855 the eyes of America were on Canada West, on the many cities and towns that housed the refugees from the United States. Many of these places became anti-slavery centers and to these places there came Abolitionists from the States. Editors and political leaders investigated the ways of the Negroes living in freedom and many books appeared on the subject. One was written by Benjamin Drew who, in 1855, traveled through a score of Canadian towns and interviewed hundreds of fugitives. In St. Catharines he was shown around by the Reverend Hiram Wilson,

and one of the first persons he met was Harriet Tubman. To him she summed up the meaning of slavery:

"I grew up like a neglected weed—ignorant of liberty, having no experience of it. I was not happy or contented: every time I saw a white man I was afraid of being carried away. I had two sisters carried away in a chain gang—one of them left two children. We were always uneasy. Now I've been free, I know what slavery is. I have seen hundreds of escaped slaves but I never saw one who was willing to go back and be a slave. I have no opportunity to see my friends in my native land. We would rather stay in our native land if we could be as free there as we are here. I think slavery is the next thing to hell. If a person would send another into bondage he would, it appears to me, be bad enough to send him to hell if he could."<sup>10</sup>

All through the mid-'fifties Harriet continued as the "subverter," talking to individuals and groups, urging them to find freedom in Canada. She stayed in the Maryland-Delaware district for various lengths of time, spreading the gospel of free Canada, educating the slaves about the Abolition movement in the North. When she had confidence in particular groups she gave them addresses of aides on the Underground and sped them northward, without herself conducting them. Sometimes she escorted parties as far as Philadelphia or New York; then they were placed in the hands of others who forwarded them to the British dominion while she returned South to start new groups onward. It was toward the close of April of 1856 when William Still thus recorded her arrival in the Quaker City with a party:

"The next arrival numbered four passengers, and came under the guidance of Harriet Tubman from Maryland. They were adults, looking as though they could take care of themselves very easily, although they had the marks of slavery on them. It was no easy matter for men and women who had been ground down all their lives, to appear as though they had been enjoying freedom. Indeed, the only wonder was that so many appeared to as good advantage as they did, after having been crushed down so long."<sup>11</sup>

Only a few weeks after Still made his latest entry in the Underground chronicles, he and his associate, J. M. McKim received a let-

ter from Thomas Garrett. To his "esteemed friends" the Quaker wrote, revealing the heat of operations on the Road: "Those four I wrote thee about arrived safe up in the neighborhood of Longwood, and Harriet Tubman followed after in the stage yesterday. I shall expect five more from the same neighborhood next trip." <sup>12</sup>

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If there are few insights into Harriet's personal side, there is at least one which throws a shaft of light into all of this lack. It is the poignant bit of how Harriet "kidnapped" a niece named Margaret Stewart, a child who remained throughout life the favorite kin of Harriet Tubman. There is only one explanation for the unbroken, life-long shower of affection which Harriet vented upon this girl. It grew out of Harriet's dislocated love life. She was warm enough to require and to have the most personal emotions, to have a need for a husband, and a need for her own children; and her affection for Margaret Stewart, in some way, supplied this lack. Harriet seized upon Margaret Stewart as the object of her personal emotions, lavished care and love upon her, and never relinquished this affection. The story is related by Mrs. A. J. Brickler of Wilberforce, Ohio. The event belongs to the mid-'fifties: it occurred after Harriet became acquainted with William H. Seward, but before she settled in Auburn. It belongs to the years 1855 or 1856. Mrs. Brickler recites the following history of her mother and the fascinating relationship of her mother to the liberator:

"My mother's life really began with Aunt Harriet kidnapping her from her home on Eastern Shore, Maryland, when she was a little girl eight or nine years old. I say mother's life began then because her memories of her Southern home were very vague. One thing she knew and that was that neither she, her brothers or her mother had ever been slaves. Her grandfather on her mother's side had bought his wife and children's time which made them free. Her mother's marriage to Harriet's brother, an ex-slave, seems not to have hindered the family's progress for mother said they had a pair of slick chestnut horses and a shiny carriage in which they rode to church. That was all she remembered of her home. Her next memory was of Aunt Harriet's visit to the home. She fell in love with the little girl who was my mother. Maybe it was because in

mother she saw the child she herself might have been if slavery had been less cruel. Maybe it was because she knew the joys of motherhood would never be hers and she longed for some little creature who would love her for her own self's sake. Certainly whatever her emotion, it was stronger than her better judgment, for when her visit was ended, she, secretly, and without so much as a by-your-leave, took the little girl with her to her Northern home. I wonder what her thoughts could have been as she and her little partner stood side by side on the deck of the steamer looking far out over the water. They made the trip by water as that was what impressed mother so greatly that she forgot to weep over her separation from her twin brother, her mother and the shiny carriage she liked so much. Aunt Harriet must have regretted her act for she knew she had taken the child from a sheltered good home to a place where there was nobody to care for her. She must have known that the warmth of this new love was not great enough to calm her restless soul and turn her into a domestic. She knew she had violated her brother's home and sorrow and anger were there. I suppose she thought of her white friends in the North and decided to place her dearest possession in their hands. She gave the little girl, my mother, to Mrs. William H. Seward, the Governor's wife. This kindly lady brought up mother—not as a servant but as a guest within her home. She taught mother to speak properly, to read, write, sew, do housework and act as a lady. Whenever Aunt Harriet came back, mother was dressed and sent in the Seward carriage to visit her. Strange to say, mother looked very much like Aunt Harriet. . . .”<sup>13</sup>