Chapter VIII

THE ESCAPE OF JOSIAH BAILEY

Song, or the spiritual, as a means of communication, was a definite part of each of Harriet's campaigns. The spiritual with its hidden meaning, was employed usually when the situation was most dangerous. The idea of song was, in itself, disarming; thus, when the Negro sang he pampered his master's understanding of him as a "loyal, satisfied, slave." With a melody on his lips to cloak words which held an important and immediate significance, it was possible to dupe the slaveholder.

Once, when Harriet had been concealed in the woods with a party of Negroes who were hungry, she left them long enough to go to a "station" to find or buy food. She dared not return to them until night for fear of being watched and so revealing their hiding place. She had arranged with them to keep alert for her song when she came back, for by this she would warn them of safety or danger. As she neared her brood she sang the following stanzas to let them know of her arrival:

Hail, oh hail, ye happy spirits,
Death no more shall make you fear,
Grief nor sorrow, pain nor anguish
Shall no more distress you here.

Around you are ten thousand angels,
Always ready to obey command.
They are always hovering around you,
Till you reach the heavenly land.

Jesus, Jesus will go with you;
He will lead you to his throne;
He who died has gone before you,
Trod the winepress all alone.

He whose thunders shake creation;
He who bids the planets roll;
He who rides upon the tempest
And His sceptre sways the whole.

Dark and thorny is the desert,
Through the pilgrim makes his way,
Yet beyond this vale of sorrow
Lie the fields of endless day.

Harriet's fugitives understood that if this song was sung twice it was secure for them to emerge. As it happened it was unsafe for them to come out of hiding and she communicated the danger to them in one short stanza within which the ominous note can be detected:

Moses, go down in Egypt,
Tell old Pharoah, let me go;
Hadn't been for Adam's fall,
Shouldn't have to have died at all.[1]

That was sung in allegro tempo and the stanza is one that belongs to the nationally known, "Go Down, Moses."

The much-heralded spiritual, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," had a definite association with Harriet, but not necessarily an origin with her. Harriet was known by various names, one of which was "Old Chariot," perhaps as a rhyme to her own name.[2] The term also connoted the idea of escape by "chariot," that is, by any means which a company could employ to proceed northward. When the enslaved black sang, "I looked over Jordan and what did I see, Coming for to carry me home," it was over the Mason-Dixon line that he was looking; the band of angels was Harriet or another conductor coming for him; and "home" was a haven in the free states or Canada. Here is a stanza of one of Harriet's songs with such a reference:

When that there old chariot comes,
I'm going to leave you;
I'm bound for the promised land,
I'm going to leave you.[3]

This spiritual was underlain with a most material purpose. The words "meant something more than a journey to the Heavenly Canaan."

Harriet's use of song shows one of the origins of music in the American Negro. Music was an expression largely of his struggle, and not necessarily of his "light-heartedness." It was often an expression of his labor, his fight, his tragedy. Music was frequently a means, a leverage, a shrewd resort; it was a mask for the real Negro who was, beneath the melody, thinking, planning and advancing. Harriet, better than any other Negro is the best illustration of this. She has been cited as a case in point to illustrate that "religious" songs, so-called, had social meanings. "Once in America when men owned other men as chattels, Negro slaves chanted thinly-disguised songs of protest set to the meter of spirituals—"Go Down, Moses," the fighting song of Harriet Tubman who came like Moses to redeem her black kinsmen from the "Egypt-land of the South," "Steal Away," which invariably meant a summons to sneak off to the woods for a slave meeting; and the militant, "Follow the Drinking Gourd" which meant following the Great Dipper to the Ohio River and freedom." [4]

Alice Stone Blackwell, white suffrage leader, recalls Harriet's description of her use of songs. "If I remember correctly, Harriet Tubman told me that when she was convoying parties of fugitives, she used to guide them by the songs that she sang as she walked along the roads . . . it was when her parties of fugitives were in hiding, that she directed them by her songs, as to whether they might show themselves, or must continue to lie low . . . No one would notice what was sung by an old colored woman, as she trudged along the road." [5]

The use of spirituals on the "middle passage" is best illustrated in the record of one of Harriet's trips, a journey in which a Negro named Josiah Bailey took a part. The escape, with four slaves accompanying Harriet, occurred near the close of the year 1856 when her activity was of the most intrepid sort. By now the spirit of escape was rampant all through the Eastern Shore.

Josiah Bailey, who was called Joe, was regarded as a valuable slave, a large reward having been offered for his capture. He was a compelling physical specimen and a man of more than ordinary sensitivity. At the time there was widespread notice of this flight.

One of the advertisements, published in an Eastern Shore newspaper, described the three male members of the company:

HEAVY REWARD

TWO THOUSAND SIX HUNDRED DOLLARS REWARD

Ran away from the subscriber, on Saturday night, November 15th, 1856, Josiah and William Bailey and Peter Pennington. Joe is about 5 feet 10 inches in height, of a chestnut color, bald head, with a remarkable scar on one of his cheeks, not positive on which it is, but think it is on the left, under the eye, has intelligent countenance, active and well-made. He is about 28 years old. Bill is of a darker color, about 5 feet 8 inches in height, stammers a little when confused, well-made, and older than Joe, well dressed, but may have pulled kearsey on over their other clothes. Peter is smaller than either the others, about 25 years of age, dark chestnut color, 5 feet 7 or 8 inches high.

A reward of fifteen hundred dollars will be given to any person who will apprehend the said Joe Bailey, and lodge him safely in the jail at Easton, Talbot Co., Md., and $300 for Bill and $800 for Peter.

W. R. HUGHLETT,
JOHN C. HENRY,
T. WRIGHT.[6]

The fourth slave, not mentioned in the advertisement, was a woman, Eliza Nokey, of whom little is known, except that she was a member of the caravan.

Late in the Fall of 1856 Josiah had been administered a severe flogging by his master, William R. Hughlett, and this had decided him upon the course of escape. Immediately he made his way to the cabin of Harriet's parents, told them what had happened, avowed his determination to flee, and asked to be notified when next Harriet should put in an appearance. Meantime he interested his brother in going along with him. Josiah must have suffered much to think of escaping, for he was prepared to leave behind a wife and three children.[7]

Soon afterward Harriet arrived, and the party took to the Road. They were pursued. They were hidden in "potato holes" while their pursuers passed within a few feet of them; they were passed

along by friends in various disguises; they scattered and separated, and were led by guides by devious routes to a new meeting place; they were taken in by Sam Green, an important conductor who was later jailed for his Abolition work, and at last they reached the outskirts of Wilmington.[8]

The Wilmington bridge, which the party must cross, was heavily guarded by police. Placards announcing the escaping party were posted everywhere. A twelve thousand dollar reward notice for the capture of Harriet was among the posters. But in spite of the heavy guard, Harriet was able, by means of scattering her group, to place them in various colored homes in the vicinity. For the purpose of crossing the bridge she communicated with her regular stand-by, Thomas Garrett. As soon as the Quaker learned of the plight of the slaves he evolved a plan to aid them. He engaged two wagons and filled them with bricklayers. He sent them across the bridge, and they went as if on a party, singing and shouting. The guards saw them pass, and of course expected them to re-cross the bridge later. After nightfall the wagons returned, but this time concealing the fugitives. The slaves were on the bottom of each of the wagons, and the bricklayers still sang and shouted and diverted attention as the fugitives entered the gates of Wilmington.

When the pioneers reached Philadelphia William Still made special notes on Josiah Bailey, and he concluded by observing of the party that their spirits never flagged and they had determined not to stop, short of Canada. Yet one of the company was destined to "flag," and it was none other than the much-admired Josiah Bailey. When he walked into the anti-slavery office of Oliver Johnson, in New York, that Abolitionist recognized him from descriptions that had already been sent ahead, and he greeted the hulking slave with the statement, "Well, I'm glad to see the man whose head is worth fifteen hundred dollars."

Immediately this plunged Josiah into the deepest gloom. The black man believed that if he, an unknown slave, could be recognized at a glance so far from home, the enemy must be too strong for resistance, and capture was certain. He settled into a despair that could not be shaken, and he refused to speak throughout the remainder of the journey.

Josiah had not counted upon the careful organization of the Road, and at last he, and the others, arrived at Niagara Falls, the crossroad between the United States and the British dominion.

The conductor and the fellow slaves tried to stimulate their melancholy companion to at least take a look at the famous Falls, but even to this he would not assent. Finally they were traveling, by "iron horse," across the Suspension Bridge, the span that cut off bondage from freedom, and the whole party broke into song. To the tune of "Oh, Susannah," they poured out several stanzas:

I'm on my way to Canada,
That cold and dreary land;
The sad effects of slavery,
I can no longer stand.

I've served my master all my days,
Without a dime's reward;
And now I'm forced to run away,
To flee the lash abroad.

Farewell, old master, don't think hard of me,
I'm on my way to Canada, where all the slaves are free.

The hounds are baying on my track,
Old master comes behind,
Resolved that he will bring me back,
Before I cross the line;

I'm now embarked for yonder shore,
There a man's a man by law;
The iron horse will bear me o'er,
To shake the lion's paw.

Oh, righteous Father, will thou not pity me,
And aid me on to Canada, where all the slaves are free.

Oh, I heard Queen Victoria say,
That if we would forsake
Our native land of slavery,
And come across the lake;

That she was standing on the shore,
With arms extended wide,
To give us all a peaceful home
Beyond the rolling tide.

Farewell, old master, don't think hard of me,
I'm on my way to Canada, where all the slaves are free.

Mid-way across the Suspension Bridge the United States ends and Canada begins; and Harriet knew from a slight descent on the Canadian side that they had "crossed the line."

She sprang to Josiah's side, and she shook him with all her might as she shouted, "Joe, you've shook the lion's paw! Joe, you're *free!*"

Her words broke through his emotional apathy and he looked up. He raised his hands, and with tears streaming he broke out in song:

Glory to God and Jesus too,
One more soul is safe!
Oh, go and carry the news,
One more soul got safe!

That is how "spirituals" were born; they came from the slave's very soul, from his experiences in desperation and his victories; they grew out of the Negro's hope and struggle for a better life *here.* If that stanza had not originated with Bailey, still, some slave in the same situation had first sung it.

Now Josiah could not be stopped. His voice reared above all others, over and over singing,

Glory to God and Jesus too,
One more soul got safe!

When they stepped out of the car Josiah continued his hosannah of joy. The attempts to quiet him failed; white people gathered about to listen to his paen of celebration, and behold his wild emotion. There was only one more trip for him, he said, and that was to heaven.

At that, Harriet uttered a comment that must have thrown the whole scene into a new tangent: "Well, you old fool you, you

might have looked at the Falls first and gone to heaven afterwards!" [9]

Josiah had aroused himself with thanks to Jesus but he knew, and the other fugitives knew that it was very real forces that had freed them: Harriet Tubman, and the money, kindness and bravery of the station-masters, and their own will to liberation. Josiah sang a song full of hosannas to the Lord, but afterwards he did as all other newly-freed: he simply thanked Harriet Tubman, and asked her to convey his heartfelt appreciation to all of those on the "line" who had helped him out of bondage. When Josiah Bailey raised his paen to Jesus Christ it was Harriet Tubman that he meant, for as one observer of the Negro, the spiritual and the black man's struggle has aptly said, "King Jesus is not just the abstract Christ; he is whoever helps the oppressed and the disfranchised, or gives him a right to his life." [10]