Chapter XI

"THE GREATEST HEROINE OF THE AGE"

Harriet was active on a variety of fronts after the year 1857, although the Underground remained a major occupation. She began addressing anti-slavery conventions in the late 'fifties, or at least, the record of her public appearances then begins. If anything took precedence over her work as a conductor, it was her developing association with John Brown, and their plans for raiding the Government arsenal at Harper's Ferry at a later date.

Harriet was never a full-time, paid Abolitionist. Even at this late date she was the main support of her parents, who were now too old to work, and she interspersed her Abolition activities with various temporary domestic jobs. Subsidy for her political life was irregular. Once, as shall be noted directly, she appealed to an anti-slavery body to aid her parents, because "the labor required for their support rendered her incapable of doing anything in the way of business (that is, politics)." [1]

With the widening of her scope of activities, her work on the Underground from 1857 into 1859 was converging into something of a climax, although she would not make her final rescue until late in 1860. "It now came to pass that . . . rewards were offered for the apprehension of the Negro woman who was denuding the fields of their laborers, and cabins of their human livestock . . ." [2] By the Autumn of 1857 Harriet, if not single-handedly, then primarily, aroused the Eastern Shore slaveholders to the point of organized action against the Underground. The Sam Green prosecution had not terrorized anyone. Not only had Harriet fled with her old folks a couple weeks after Sam went to jail, but the rate of slave exodus in the forthcoming months exceeded anything before in the history of Maryland.

At one time she collected and sent on a gang of thirty-nine fugitives in the care of others, as from some cause she was prevented from accompanying them.[3] That was in the month of October, 1857. They were Cambridge slaves: all left together, but for stra-

tegic reasons separated before reaching Philadelphia.[4] One contingent composed of twenty-eight men, women and children went heavily armed, with revolvers, pistols, sword-canes, butcher knives and other instruments of defense. It was common knowledge in every newspaper office in the North that the Bucktown-Cambridge region in Dorchester County, the Harriet Tubman country, was being plucked of slaves like a chicken of its feathers before roasting. Every Abolitionist editor knew of the high rate of flight in that region, and many found occasion to comment upon it in the ensuing months. When the party of twenty-eight arrived at the Quaker City, it made a profound impression on the station-hands. When William Still released his chronicle of slave narratives a few years later, the account of this caravan was accompanied by a vivid drawing of "Twenty-Eight Fugitives Escaping from the Eastern Shore of Maryland." [5] The brigade of thirty-nine was only part of the October outflux from the Cambridge region. Only a few days before they set out, a smaller company of fifteen had gone North, and had been duly registered by the Philadelphia historian. In fact, Still noted sixty arrivals from Harriet's region in that month alone.

If October, 1857, was an intensive month for Eastern Shore escapes, it was only somewhat more exceptional than others of the same year and of 1858. There was a constant procession of runaways, singly and in groups; the route from Harriet's region to the free states seemed accessible to any slave that desired to know it. It was no wonder then that the slaveholders, at about this time, began an organized drive against Negroes, free and slave, a movement that gained impetus in each county of the Eastern Shore, spread to the whole State of Maryland by 1858, and resulted in a State-wide convention by mid-Summer of 1859. It was this crusade, initiated by Dorchester County slaveholders in November of 1857, and culminating a year and a half later in a huge Baltimore convention against Abolitionism, the Underground, and calling for the re-enslavement of free Negroes, that was the greatest single tribute to the performance of Harriet Tubman, her fellow conductors, the station masters on the way north and the daring fugitives themselves. The panic that broke out at this time and lasted for so long was the major repercussion of Harriet's decade of activity.

The Cambridge slaveholders, meeting in that town on November 2, 1857, after the last decampment of blacks, resolved to enforce a number of ancient acts of the Maryland Assembly relating to servants and slaves.[6] They fished up one law dating back to 1715, providing that servants could not go farther than ten miles from their "master, mistress or dame, without a note in their hands . . . under the penalty of being taken for a runaway," and to suffer a runaway's punishment. The application of this was intended to give any white man the right to accost any Negro and question him. An 1806 act, intended to make re-capture of slaves attractive, provided for payment of six dollars to anyone seizing a runaway; and the resurrection of the most dangerous measures, those of 1825 and 1839, calling for the re-enslavement of free Negroes, and their sale and banishment from the State, would prevent them from aiding their enslaved brothers, it was thought.

Cambridge sounded a welcome tocsin to counties all over the Eastern Shore; and quickly, the slave powers called local meetings to revive the same set of acts and prepare for unified action. Ten months later, in August of 1858, the movement was rolling through the eastern half of Maryland, and the Dorchester County leaders undertook measures for the holding of a general Eastern Shore Convention.[7] It was the free Negro mainly against whom the assault was directed; it was he who encouraged the slave to resistance: therefore, re-enslave the free Negro! The Dorchester heads, long made frantic by their daughter, Harriet Tubman, dreamed of welding the whole South into a holy war against the free black, dreamed of being the spearhead in the whole question. "Let us not only have a Convention here on the Eastern Shore, but let it be held in view of the holding hereafter of a great Slaveholding Convention of the slave States. Similar laws with regard to free Negroes and Abolitionists and upon the subject of manumission, should be passed by all the States; and the initiatory to this result must be a great Southern Convention—not a Convention of mere words, but one of action —an action which coming events will force upon the South and upon us of Maryland. . . ." [8] A sinister crusade, but one into which the Maryland powers pushed, with all their vigor. The ancient acts were brought up to date, and free Negroes were re-enslaved. "Eigh-

ty-nine were sold in Maryland under the act of 1858 justifying such re-enslavement." [9] Simultaneous with the intensification of the repression against both the slave and the free blacks, the slaveholders of both western and eastern Maryland drew plans for a State-wide Convention to be held in the Summer of 1859.

The Maryland panic had become the front-page news in both pro-slavery and Abolition journals ever since the close of the year 1857. In the offices of Oliver Johnson's *National Anti-Slavery Standard* it was well understood why the Dorchester fathers had initiated the State-wide and the nation-wide movement. Here Harriet had often stopped with her broods and received the assistance of the Abolition editors and their organization before going on to Canada. *The Standard* said, "The operation of the Underground Railroad on the Maryland border, within the last few years has been so extensive that in some neighborhoods nearly the whole slave population have made their escape, and the Convention is a result of the general panic on the part of the owners of this specie of property." [10]

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When the State-wide Convention of slaveholders was held in Baltimore, in the Summer of 1859, they were defeated in their chief aim, that of effecting the removal of free Negroes from their State. There were in Maryland 80,000 free blacks, and by now they wrought enough political influence to thwart the aims of the 16,000 slaveholders of that State. The slaveowners charged that these free Negroes were a threat to business enterprise, a competitive force with white labor, and they "subverted the slave population." But there was a sharp struggle among the slaveholders; the black man had strong allies even among this group, and these friends were influential enough to compel a resolution that any such step against the free Negro was "impolitic, inexpedient and uncalled for, by any public exigency which would justify it." [11]

James W. C. Pennington, an ex-slave and a highly respected critic, commenting upon the defeat of this proposal, described it as a victory for the free Negroes and a "declaration in favor of free Negro labor." [12] Thus there appeared, as early as 1859, a straw in the wind that would blow during the war period. Even in the South, in the heart of the enemy's camp, there were powerful forces

in favor of advancing the Negro from his slave status into that of free labor, or of defending the status of free labor after that was achieved. Speaking of the fugitive question, Pennington delivered an indirect compliment to the work of Harriet when he observed, as others had also declared, that Maryland, "more than any other State, had been drained by the exit of fugitive slaves"; he congratulated the fugitives for their work in the cause of freedom, but added that "their emancipated brethren at home have been doing even better." Thus the Negro fought on all fronts: as a slave, as a free Negro in the South, and as a fugitive in the North.

Some slaveholders' groups, wrathful over the defeat of their plan to expel the free Negroes from the State, stiffened their offensive against the slaves, and tightened their legislation to make more operative the capture of fugitives; and it was about now that Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson made the statement that if Harriet Tubman continued to go South on her slave-running expeditions, she would certainly be caught and burned alive.

Of the danger to Harriet, in this period, it was said: ". . . she was going down, watched for everywhere, after there had been a meeting of slaveholders in the court-house of one of the large cities of Maryland, and an added reward had been put upon her head, with various threats of the different cruel devices by which she would be tortured and put to death; friends gathered around her, imploring her not to go on directly in the face of danger and death . . . " [13] but she continued her work. Later the Abolitionist lecturer, Sallie Holley, wrote, "*Forty-thousand* dollars was not too great a reward for the Maryland slaveholders to offer for her." [14]

When the lynch spirit against her was at its highest she received from the Reverend Dr. Michael Willis of Toronto, the funds to make another trip to the Eastern Shore. Dr. Willis was the principal of Knox College, at Toronto, and he was President of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada. In this position he could not but be closely associated with Harriet. Dr. Willis, a Scotchman by birth, had headed the Canadian anti-slavers all their organized history, since 1851. How often he and his followers aided Harriet cannot be ascertained, but in October of 1858, when the pressure against Harriet was heaviest, Dr. Willis stopped at *Frederick Doug-*

lass' Paper, in Rochester, and left a gift, probably funds, for the conductor. The *Paper* of October 29, 1858, carried a note on its editorial page, a communication addressed to Harriet, reading, "A valuable parcel left in our care by Rev. Dr. Willis, of Toronto, awaits the call of Harriet Tubman." [15]

Canadian aid was only part of the foreign support that her work merited at this time. As far away as Edinburgh, Scotland, there were persons vitally interested in her labors. Eliza Wigham, the head of the Anti-Slavery Society of that city, had a prolonged correspondence with Thomas Garrett, from about 1857 to 1860, and in the exchange of information the Quaker had described Harriet's operations. Thereafter Eliza Wigham and her Scottish associates sent funds for her, directing Garrett to place them with her.[16] She was receiving this aid at the time the Maryland slavemasters were on the march. She even had friends in Ireland, as Garrett's correspondence with William Still revealed.[17] Thus her labors were by now known on at least two continents, and in at least four countries. In spite of such a reputation she was still unknown to many sections of the American public, particularly in the West, and to large numbers of Negroes in some deep South areas. .Her reputation was the typical one of the revolutionary who engages in subterranean operations, whose labors are often forced into the open by events. She was the scourge of the Eastern slaveholders, and her work was common gossip in Maryland, Delaware and Pennsylvania, where the heavy rewards were offered for her capture. Were her conspiratorial talents unknown to the Negro leadership in the West Indies, in Brazil, and in far off Liberia, Africa? Abolition and colored leadership was then in world-wide communication, and the "legend" of Harriet was certainly one of the communiques of the international grapevine.

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Harriet traveled all through New England in the year 1859. She formed a fast friendship with Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, then a Unitarian minister in Worcester. Higginson, once he became acquainted with Harriet, admired her above all other women then living, as his words frequently attested. Whenever he spoke

of the anti-slavery figures he included mention of Harriet, directly or indirectly.

Only a few weeks after the execution of John Brown, Higginson, writing of his acquaintanceship with the old man, Harriet and others, said, "It had been my privilege to live in the best society all my life—namely that of Abolitionists and fugitive slaves. I had seen the most eminent persons of my age: several men on whose heads tens of thousands of dollars had been set; a black woman, who, after escaping from slavery herself, had gone back secretly eight times into the jaws of death to bring out persons she had never seen. . . ." [18] By the time that Higginson uttered that statement he was well-qualified to do so. In June of 1859, the fighting minister, as he was known, wrote a letter to his mother telling her that Harriet had been visiting him:

Worcester, June 17, 1859

Dearest Mother:

. . . We have had the greatest heroine of the age here, Harriet Tubman, a black woman, and a fugitive slave, who has been back *eight times* secretly and brought out in all sixty slaves with her, including all her own family, besides aiding many more in other ways to escape. Her tales of adventure are beyond anything in fiction and her ingenuity and generalship are extraordinary. I have known her for some time and mentioned her in speeches once or twice—the slaves call her Moses. She has had a reward of twelve thousand dollars offered for her in Maryland and will probably be burned alive whenever she is caught, which she probably will be, first or last, as she is going again. She has been in the habit of working in hotels all summer and laying up money for this crusade in the winter. She is jet black and cannot read or write, only *talk,* besides acting. . . .[19]

Colonel Higginson introduced Harriet only a few weeks later to an important anti-slavery audience at Framingham, Massachusetts, when the Fourth of July was celebrated. The Fourth was an event for the members and friends of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society who were "to be counted by thousands." [20] The object was to remember the slave and "to renewedly consecrate themselves to his

deliverance." It was an out-of-doors gathering, and according to *The Liberator,* the day was an exceedingly fine one. Colonel Thomas Higginson was elected President of the Society for the ensuing year. He regarded Harriet as an eloquent orator, and one of his statements reveals that he was familiar with the sight of her before anti-slavery groups. "On the anti-slavery platform where I was reared, I cannot remember one real poor speaker; as Emerson said, 'eloquence was dog-cheap there'. . . . I know that my own teachers were the slave women who came shyly before the audience . . . women who had been stripped and whipped and handled with insolent hands and sold to the highest bidder . . . or women who, having once escaped, had, like Harriet Tubman, gone back again and again into the land of bondage to bring away their kindred and friends. . . . We learned to speak because their presence made silence impossible." [21]

Harriet created such a sensation that James Yerrington, the phonographer (secretary), was a bit paralyzed, unfortunately, and he was compelled to report that words could not do justice to her; and he therefore did not undertake to repeat them! When Yerrington stopped reporting and turned to a moment of personal admiration, he expressed a mood that Harriet excited in most of those who came to know her:

. . . . . .

> The President then said that he wished to introduce to the audience a conductor on the Underground Railroad, who, having first transformed herself from a chattel into a human being, had since transformed sixty other chattels into other human beings, by her own personal efforts. It was rather hard to introduce her. She came here from a place in the slave states; she came by land, and had been here a reasonable time. (Laughter.) At the South she was called "Moses," after an ancient leader, who took men and women into the promised land. (Applause.)
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> "Moses," the deliverer, then stood up before the audience, who greeted her with enthusiastic cheers. She spoke briefly, telling the story of her sufferings as a slave, her escape, and her achievements on the Underground Railroad, in a style of quaint simplicity, which excited the most profound interest in her

hearers. *The mere words could do no justice to the speaker, and therefore we do not undertake to give them; but we advise all our readers to take the earliest opportunity to see and hear her.*

Mr. Higginson stated that this brave woman had never asked for a cent from the abolitionists, but all her operations had been conducted at her own cost, with money earned by herself. Now, however, having brought her father and mother out of slavery, she found that the labor required for their support rendered her incapable of doing anything in the way of business, and she therefore desired to raise a few hundred dollars to enable her to buy a little place where her father and mother could support themselves, and enable her to resume the practice of her profession! (Laughter and applause.)

A collection was taken in her behalf, amounting to thirty-seven dollars, for which, at the conclusion of the meeting, in a few earnest and touching words, she spoke her thanks.[22]

Actually the Seward transaction had been cleared for some time, but she now sought funds to help pay for the property, and as she said, to be at the service of Abolition.

When Colonel Higginson introduced her as "Moses" this was a measure of safety to cloak her identity from the slavehunters as much as it was a crowning compliment to her leadership. The comment of Yerrington, that "it was rather hard to introduce her," further confirms the precaution taken to protect her. The slave power could have demanded of the Massachusetts government its right, under the Fugitive Slave Law, to have her returned to the South; and later, in fact, in anticipation of this development, Harriet's friends were stimulated to rush her off to Canada. Harriet had reached a stage in her career where she swung, like a pendulum, from the Underground into the open, and now the pendulum swung faster. That is why she was desirous of utilizing whatever uncertainties prevailed in official quarters about her identity and whereabouts; and that is why she hoped to remain out of the public eye, leaving this domain to the orators and writers. Had it not been for the dire need of assistance for her parents, in order that she might continue her political services, it is doubtful whether she would

have risked appearing before such a major body as the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. But Harriet's attempt to "labor in a private way," to be witnessed only by "the midnight sky and the silent stars," as Frederick Douglass put it,[23] was fast coming to an end, in spite of her desire for secrecy, in spite of her belief that she could be most useful so long as she performed behind the scenes. There were further efforts to maintain personal secrecy, but the bursting of the John Brown insurrection soon would definitely expose her in all of her past and present activity and make impossible further veiling from the public gaze.

Similarly, she employed concealment in an address delivered a few weeks later at the New England Colored Citizens' Convention, which met in the Meionaon, in Boston. It was Monday morning, August 1st of 1859, when they met, and Harriet, still in New England, attended these sessions. Here she was introduced as Miss Harriet Garrison, "one of the most successful conductors on the Underground Railroad." Harriet told one of her typical stories, thus illustrating her anti-colonizationist attitude. As was usual in her expression of political views, she chose a figure of speech to illustrate the point. *The Liberator* account:

> "Miss Harriet Garrison was introduced as one of the most successful conductors on the Underground Railroad. She denounced the colonization movement, and told a story of a man who sowed onions and garlic on his land to increase his dairy production, but he soon found the butter was strong, and would not sell, and so he concluded to sow clover instead. But he soon found the wind had blown the onions and garlic all over his field. Just so, she stated, the white people had got the Negroes here to do their drudgery, and now they were trying to root them out and ship them to Africa. 'But,' said she, 'they can't do it; we're rooted here, and they can't pull us up.' She was much applauded." [24]

This was Harriet Tubman. No other reference to a Harriet Garrison, colored, as "one of the most successful conductors on the Underground Railroad," has been found. Nor do any records of colored conventions indicate the presence a second time of a Harriet Garrison. Harriet Tubman had taken William Lloyd Garrison's

last name and coupled it with her own first name for the temporary purpose of the Negro Convention. The figurative method of expression was peculiarly her own. Harriet Garrison was none other than Harriet Tubman, still living "underground," and now that her fugitive status was too dangerously revealed, she was making extra efforts to keep her identity secret.

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If Harriet's career had ended at this point, if she had been burned at the stake somewhere in the South, as Colonel Higginson predicted she would be, if she had not lived to become possibly the outstanding woman of the Civil War itself, then her record in the 1850's alone (apart from other important events to be related directly), would have secured for her a lasting position among Americans as the ablest woman revolutionary, and a conspirator with but few peers among men. When it is realized that the Underground was the major means of struggle of the Negro people and their white allies in their drive toward the ultimate goal of emancipation, then we can better understand the generosity with which she gave herself to this work. For a half century the Underground system had been plunging its roots into the political fabric of the North and South. For the past ten years it had, like some huge social lever, separated the two sections, and rendered irreparable the breach. Millions of dollars worth of slaves, a total of 50,000, with an average value of one thousand dollars apiece, had flown to the North. Harriet had herself "stolen" about three hundred thousand dollars' worth of fellow blacks and stimulated other hundreds to flight. A few conductors spirited away larger number of slaves, as did Reverend Calvin Fairbank and Captain Fountain, but they were white, educated, and men. Harriet's achievement was in spite of her color, which was always suspect, in spite of her sex, and over against the handicap of her chronic illness. She was unable to read or write, she lacked knowledge of maps and geography, and she pursued her course in spite of being the support of her parents and others. Moreover, the uniform success of her campaigns was a record unrealized by any of the other conductors; and the excellence of her achievement lay in the fact that she was never martyred, never

jailed, and never even for a day did she fall into the hands of her enemies, but outwitted them at every point.

It has been estimated that Harriet made nineteen excursions into the slave land, and most authorities have accepted this estimate. But if she had conducted only fifteen voyages, or even a dozen, her record of rescues, the moral influence upon the Abolitionists, the economic consequences in weakening the slaveholders, the increased stimulus to Negro morale in the South, and the culminating political result in intensifying the North-South contradictions, still add up to the career of an unparalleled conspirator and social fighter in any clime, in any nation, in any period of history. Her leadership of repeated blows at the Eastern slaveholders, with the hosts of the Underground network marshalled at her side, contending over thousands of square miles of embattled ground, created such a total effect in the ante-bellum period, laying siege, as it did, to the South's fundamental nature—the forceful containment of Negroes in slavery —that the prolonged guerilla operation can only be called the Battle of the Underground, and it must be compared to the victorious command of a major front in the Civil War itself.