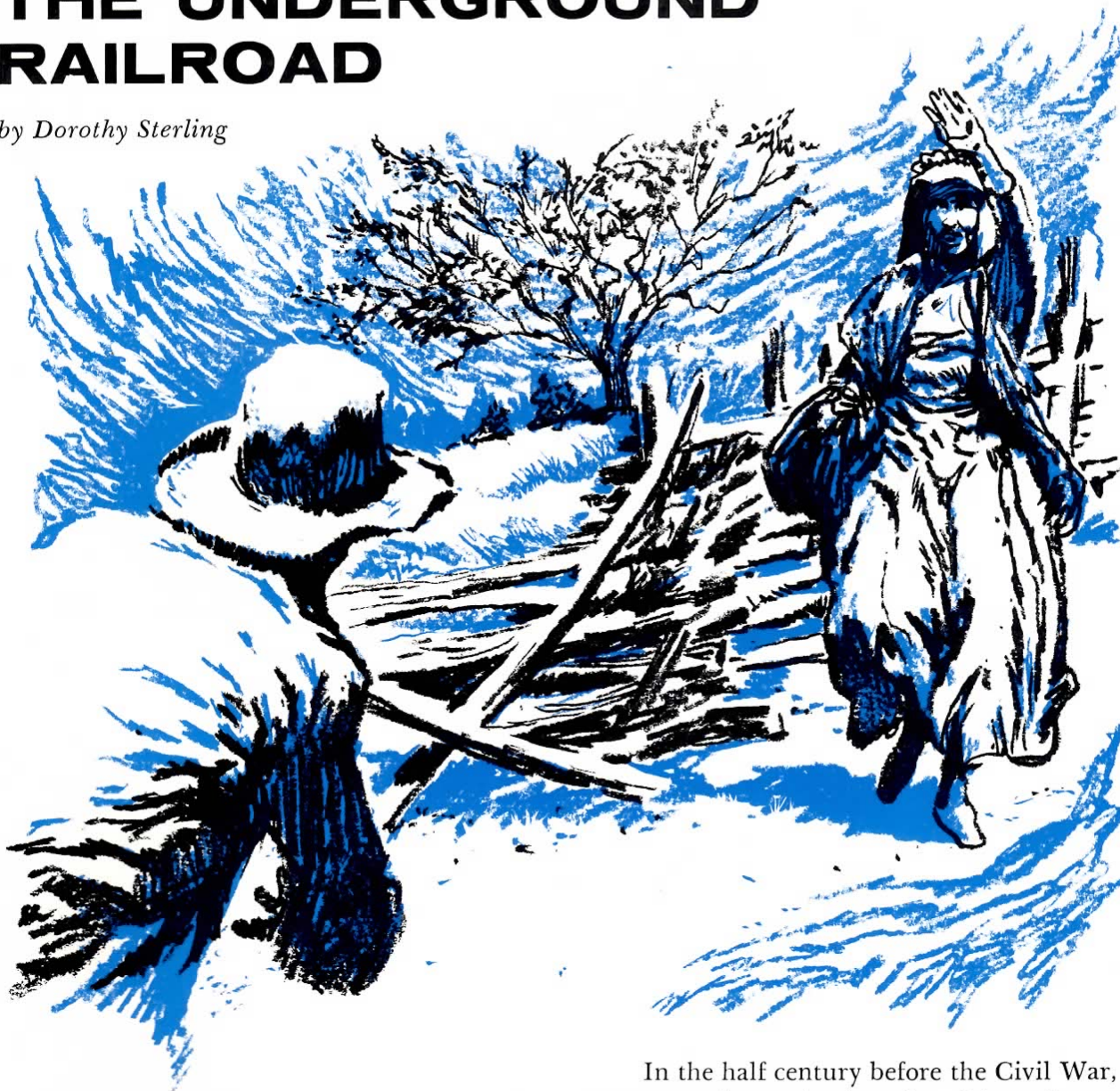


THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

by Dorothy Sterling



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In the half century before the Civil War, a new era began in America. More than a hundred thousand slaves, yearning for freedom, risked their lives to get beyond reach of their owners. One man had himself shut into

a crate and shipped to freedom as freight. Others, disguised as whites, traveled first class all the way into the North. But most made frantic escapes just minutes ahead of their masters' dogs.

Sympathy for these men and women grew, especially near the boundary between the North and the South. The group of people who helped runaway slaves soon became known as the Underground Railroad.

The Underground Railroad wasn't really a railroad, of course. Its tracks were country lanes, its trains were farm wagons and carriages, and its conductors were ordinary people.

The Underground Railroad acquired its name in 1831. That summer an escaping slave swam across the Ohio River with his master rowing close behind him. The owner had almost caught up when suddenly the slave scrambled up the bank and disappeared. No matter where the master looked, no matter whom he asked, he couldn't find the runaway. Returning to Kentucky, puzzled and angry, he declared, "That slave must have gone on an underground road."

Those who sheltered runaways chuckled over the irate man's phrase—and improved it. Why not an Underground *Railroad* that sped slaves to freedom? It sounded mysterious and powerful.

These same people came to speak of themselves as "conductors," "stationmasters," and "brakemen." They called their homes "stations" or "depots," and they talked of "forwarding goods" and "catching the next train." When they collected money for fugitives, they were "selling stock in the road."

But despite the light tone of those who ran it, the Underground Railroad was a serious business. Even when runaways reached a free state, they were still in danger. Armed slave catchers, enticed by the promise of reward, pursued them to Ohio, Pennsylvania, Boston, and New York.

Stationmasters, too, ran risks. When Thomas Garrett was sixty years old he was fined heavily for helping two children to escape. "Now that thee hast relieved me of what little I possessed," he told the judge, "I will go home and put another story on my house. I want room to shelter more of God's poor." After the news of his trial reached plantations in Delaware and Maryland, so many slaves tapped on his windows at night that he did indeed build an addition to his house.

Another man, a peddler, built a false bottom in his wagon. A farmer dug a second cellar under his house, with tunnels leading out to his barn and corncrib. A boy hitched up a team and drove fugitives to the next station at night while his father entertained their owner.

Most Underground Railroad agents waited for their passengers to appear, fed and clothed them, and sent them on their way. But increasingly, in the 1840s and '50s, the agents made trips to the South. They called these journeys "entering Egypt," because they were helping slaves escape from a land of bondage.

Handsome, reckless John Fairfield was a young Virginian from a slaveholding family who devoted his life to freeing slaves. With his Southern accent and aristocratic manners,

he could travel through the slave states without arousing suspicion. Negroes in the North brought him their savings and begged him to rescue their families from the cotton fields. And he did, often rounding up dozens of slaves at one time and taking them away.

Once, when Fairfield discovered that a number of his "clients" in Maryland, Virginia, and Washington were light-skinned, he invested in some theatrical makeup. Assembling his Maryland passengers in Baltimore, he helped them put on wigs and apply powder and paint to their faces. Then he sent them on a train to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Similarly wigged and powdered, a second group of slaves rode the cars from Washington to Pittsburgh. But by the time Fairfield set out from Virginia with his third set of passengers, slaveowners had learned of his plan. They hired a special train and raced after his Pittsburgh express. With a full head of steam, they were pulling abreast of it near Pittsburgh. But as the brakeman slowed for the stop, Fairfield hustled his freedom riders from their seats. With wigs aslant and mufflers flying, they jumped from the train and scattered through the city. They were never caught.

The best-known conductor was a Negro woman named Harriet Tubman but called "Moses" on every plantation in the South. Close to thirty when she herself escaped, she

"entered Egypt" nineteen times. With a \$4000 reward—alive or dead—on her head, she rescued three hundred slaves.

Wearing a simple disguise—a floppy sun-bonnet or a man's old hat—she would sing as she plodded along the country roads at night:

"When that old chariot comes,
Who's going with me?"

Informed by the grapevine of her impending arrival, a waiting slave would reply from the darkness:

"When that old chariot comes,
I'm going with you."

Usually her "train" departed on a Saturday night so that it would have a day's start before its passengers were missed. Once under way, there was no turning back on Harriet's road. The cloth bag around her waist contained not only medicine for the sick and food for the hungry, but a pistol for the faint of heart. If a man was exhausted, she would ford a stream carrying him in her arms. But if it was fear that made him falter, her trigger finger would tighten and she would order him to "Move or die!"

Speaking at a women's rights meeting up North, Harriet smiled as she rose after her introduction.

"Yes, ladies," she began, "I can say what most conductors can't—I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger."

CHECK YOUR READING

- The events of this story take place**
 - before the Civil War
 - during the Civil War
 - after the Civil War
- The comment about the underground road was made regarding the**
 - death of a slave in a crate
 - capture of a slave by dogs
 - successful escape of a slave
- The people who helped slaves escape spoke of this work as if they were**
 - working a farm
 - running a railroad
 - dealing in high finance
- Old Thomas Garrett was heavily fined for**
 - killing a slave owner's dog
 - crossing the Ohio border
 - helping two children escape
- He told the judge that now he was determined to**
 - recover all his money
 - get a new law passed
 - make his house larger
- Agents who went into the South to bring out slaves called their trips**
 - going to Jerusalem
 - entering Egypt
 - crossing the Jordan
- John Fairfield was able to avoid suspicion in the South because he**
 - disguised himself as a Negro
 - spoke like a Southern gentleman
 - posed as a Yankee slave catcher
- Fairfield got three groups of slaves safely into the North by**
 - making them look like white people
 - pretending they were his own slaves
 - renting a private railroad for them
- Harriet Tubman identified herself to would-be escapees by means of a**
 - secret handshake
 - familiar song
 - distinctive hat
- If an escaping slave froze with fear, Harriet would**
 - give him medicine
 - send him back home
 - threaten to shoot him

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