

THE
UNDERGROUND RAIL ROAD.

A RECORD

OF

FACTS, AUTHENTIC NARRATIVES, LETTERS, &c.,

Narrating the Hardships Hair-breadth Escapes and Death Struggles

OF THE

Slaves in their efforts for Freedom,

AS RELATED

BY THEMSELVES AND OTHERS, OR WITNESSED BY THE AUTHOR;

TOGETHER WITH

SKETCHES OF SOME OF THE LARGEST STOCKHOLDERS, AND

MOST LIBERAL AIDERS AND ADVISERS,

OF THE ROAD.

BY

WILLIAM STILL,

For many years connected with the Anti-Slavery Office in Philadelphia, and Chairman
of the Acting Vigilant Committee of the Philadelphia Branch of
the Underground Rail Road.

Illustrated with 70 fine Engravings by Bensell, Schell and others, and
Portraits from Photographs from Life.

Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant that has escaped from his master unto thee.—*Deut.* xxiii. 15.

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The wind blew fearfully. Concklin was rowing heroically when loud voices from the shore hailed him, but he was utterly deaf to the sound. Immediately one or two guns were fired in the direction of the skiff, but he heeded not this significant call; consequently here ended this difficulty. He supposed, as the wind was blowing so hard, those on shore who hailed him must have concluded that he did not hear them and that he meant no disrespect in treating them with seeming indifference. Whilst many straits and great dangers had to be passed, this was the greatest before reaching their destination.

But suffice it to say that the glad tidings which this letter contained filled the breast of Peter with unutterable delight and his friends and relations with wonder beyond degree.* No fond wife had ever waited with more longing desire for the return of her husband than Peter had for this blessed news. All doubts had disappeared, and a well grounded hope was cherished that within a few short days Peter and his fond wife and children would be reunited in Freedom on the Canada side, and that Concklin and the friends would be rejoicing with joy unspeakable over this great triumph. But alas, before the few days had expired the subjoined brief paragraph of news was discovered in the morning Ledger.

RUNAWAY NEGROES CAUGHT.—At Vincennes, Indiana, on Saturday last, a white man and four negroes were arrested. The negroes belong to B. McKiernon, of South Florence, Alabama, and the man who was running them off calls himself John H. Miller. The prisoners were taken charge of by the Marshall of Evansville.—*April 9th.*

How suddenly these sad tidings turned into mourning and gloom the hope and joy of Peter and his relatives no pen could possibly describe; at least the writer will not attempt it here, but will at once introduce a witness who met the noble Concklin and the panting fugitives in Indiana and proffered them sympathy and advice. And it may safely be said from a truer and more devoted friend of the slave they could not have received counsel.

EVANSVILLE, INDIANA, MARCH 31st, 1851.

WM. STILL: *Dear Sir,*—On last Tuesday I mailed a letter to you, written by Seth Concklin. I presume you have received that letter. It gave an account of his rescue of the family of your brother. If that is the last news you have had from them, I have very painful intelligence for you. They passed on from near Princeton, where I saw them and had a lengthy interview with them, up north, I think twenty-three miles above Vincennes, Ind., where they were seized by a party of men, and lodged in jail. Telegraphic dispatches were sent all through the South. I have since learned that the Marshall of Evansville received a dispatch from Tuscumbia, to look out for them. By some means, he and the master, so says report, went to Vincennes and claimed the fugitives, chained Mr. Concklin and hurried all off. Mr. Concklin wrote to Mr. David Stormon, Princeton, as soon as he was cast into prison, to find bail. So soon as we got the letter and could get off, two of us were about setting off to render all possible aid, when we were told they

* In some unaccountable manner this the last letter Concklin ever penned, perhaps, has been unfortunately lost.

all had passed, a few hours before, through Princeton, Mr. Concklin in chains. What kind of process was had, if any, I know not. I immediately came down to this place, and learned that they had been put on a boat at 3 P. M. I did not arrive until 6. Now all hopes of their recovery are gone. No case ever so enlisted my sympathies. I had seen Mr. Concklin in Cincinnati. I had given him aid and counsel. I happened to see them after they landed in Indiana. I heard Peter and Levin tell their tale of suffering, shed tears of sorrow for them all; but now, since they have fallen a prey to the unmerciful blood-hounds of this state, and have again been dragged back to unrelenting bondage, I am entirely unmanned. And poor Concklin! I fear for him. When he is dragged back to Alabama, I fear they will go far beyond the utmost rigor of the law, and vent their savage cruelty upon him. It is with pain I have to communicate these things. But you may not hear them from him. I could not get to see him or them, as Vincennes is about thirty miles from Princeton, where I was when I heard of the capture.

I take pleasure in stating that, according to the letter he (Concklin) wrote to Mr. D. Stewart, Mr. Concklin did not abandon them, but risked his own liberty to save them. He was not with them when they were taken; but went afterwards to take them out of jail upon a writ of Habeas Corpus, when they seized him too and lodged him in prison.

I write in much haste. If I can learn any more facts of importance, I may write you. If you desire to hear from me again, or if you should learn any thing specific from Mr. Concklin, be pleased to write me at Cincinnati, where I expect to be in a short time. If curious to know your correspondent, I may say I was formerly Editor of the "New Concord Free Press," Ohio. I only add that every case of this kind only tends to make me abhor my (no!) *this* country more and more. It is the Devil's Government, and God will destroy it.

Yours for the slave, N. R. JOHNSTON.

P. S. I broke open this letter to write you some more. The foregoing pages were written at night. I expected to mail it next morning before leaving Evansville; but the boat for which I was waiting came down about three in the morning; so I had to hurry on board, bringing the letter along. As it now is I am not sorry, for coming down, on my way to St. Louis, as far as Paducah, there I learned from a colored man at the wharf that, that same day, in the morning, the master and the family of fugitives arrived off the boat, and had then gone on their journey to Tuscumbia, but that the "white man" (Mr. Concklin) had "got away from them," about twelve miles up the river. It seems he got off the boat some way, near or at Smithland, Ky., a town at the mouth of the Cumberland River. I presume the report is true, and hope he will finally escape, though I was also told that they were in pursuit of him. Would that the others had also escaped. Peter and Levin could have done so, I think, if they had had resolution. One of them rode a horse, he not tied either, behind the coach in which the others were. He followed apparently "contented and happy." From report, they told their master, and even their pursuers, before the master came, that Concklin had decoyed them away, they coming unwillingly. I write on a very unsteady boat.

Yours, N. R. JOHNSTON.

A report found its way into the papers to the effect that "Miller," the white man arrested in connection with the capture of the family, was found drowned, with his hands and feet in chains and his skull fractured. It proved, as his friends feared, to be Seth Concklin. And in irons, upon the river bank, there is no doubt he was buried.

In this dreadful hour one sad duty still remained to be performed. Up to this moment the two sisters were totally ignorant of their brother's whereabouts. Not the first whisper of his death had reached them. But they must now be made acquainted with all the facts in the case. Accordingly

an interview was arranged for a meeting, and the duty of conveying this painful intelligence to one of the sisters, Mrs. Supplee, devolved upon Mr. McKim. And most tenderly and considerately did he perform his mournful task.

Although a woman of nerve, and a true friend to the slave, an earnest worker and a liberal giver in the Female Anti-Slavery Society, for a time she was overwhelmed by the intelligence of her brother's death. As soon as possible, however, through very great effort, she controlled her emotions, and calmly expressed herself as being fully resigned to the awful event. Not a word of complaint had she to make because she had not been apprised of his movements; but said repeatedly, that, had she known ever so much of his intentions, she would have been totally powerless in opposing him if she had felt so disposed, and as an illustration of the true character of the man, from his boyhood up to the day he died for his fellow-man, she related his eventful career, and recalled a number of instances of his heroic and daring deeds for others, sacrificing his time and often periling his life in the cause of those who he considered were suffering gross wrongs and oppression. Hence, she concluded, that it was only natural for him in this case to have taken the steps he did. Now and then overflowing tears would obstruct this deeply thrilling and most remarkable story she was telling of her brother, but her memory seemed quickened by the sadness of the occasion, and she was enabled to recall vividly the chief events connected with his past history. Thus his agency in this movement, which cost him his life, could readily enough be accounted for, and the individuals who listened attentively to the story were prepared to fully appreciate his character, for, prior to offering his services in this mission, he had been a stranger to them.

The following extract, taken from a letter of a subsequent date, in addition to the above letter, throws still further light upon the heart-rending affair, and shows Mr. Johnston's deep sympathy with the sufferers and the oppressed generally—

EXTRACT OF A LETTER FROM REV. N. R. JOHNSTON.

My heart bleeds when I think of those poor, hunted and heart-broken fugitives, though a most interesting family, taken back to bondage ten-fold worse than Egyptian. And then poor Concklin! How my heart expanded in love to him, as he told me his adventures, his trials, his toils, his fears and his hopes! After hearing all, and then seeing and communing with the family, now joyful in hopes of soon seeing their husband and father in the land of freedom; now in terror lest the human blood-hounds should be at their heels, I felt as though I could lay down my life in the cause of the oppressed. In that hour or two of intercourse with Peter's family, my heart warmed with love to them. I never saw more interesting young men. They would make Remonds or Douglasses, if they had the same opportunities.

While I was with them, I was elated with joy at their escape, and yet, when I heard their tale of woe, especially that of the mother, I could not suppress tears of deepest emotion.

My joy was short-lived. Soon I heard of their capture. The telegraph had been the means of their being claimed. I could have torn down all the telegraph wires in the land. It was a strange dispensation of Providence.

On Saturday the sad news of their capture came to my ears. We had resolved to go to their aid on Monday, as the trial was set for Thursday. On Sabbath, I spoke from Psalm xii. 5. "For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, now will I arise," saith the Lord: "I will set him in safety from him that puffeth at (from them that would enslave) him." When on Monday morning I learned that the fugitives had passed through the place on Sabbath, and Concklin in chains, probably at the very time I was speaking on the subject referred to, my heart sank within me. And even yet, I cannot but exclaim, when I think of it—O, Father! how long ere Thou wilt arise to avenge the wrongs of the poor slave! Indeed, my dear brother, His ways are very mysterious. We have the consolation, however, to know that all is for the best. Our Redeemer does all things well. When He hung upon the cross, His poor broken hearted disciples could not understand the providence; it was a dark time to them; and yet that was an event that was fraught with more joy to the world than any that has occurred or could occur. Let us stand at our post and wait God's time. Let us have on the whole armor of God, and fight for the right, knowing, that though we may fall in battle, the victory will be ours, sooner or later.

* * * * *

May God lead you into all truth, and sustain you in your labors, and fulfill your prayers and hopes. Adieu.

N. R. JOHNSTON.

LETTERS FROM LEVI COFFIN.

The following letters on the subject were received from the untiring and devoted friend of the slave, Levi Coffin, who for many years had occupied in Cincinnati a similar position to that of Thomas Garrett in Delaware, a sentinel and watchman commissioned of God to succor the fleeing bondman—

CINCINNATI, 4TH MO., 10TH, 1851.

FRIEND WM. STILL:—We have sorrowful news from our friend Concklin, through the papers and otherwise. I received a letter a few days ago from a friend near Princeton, Ind., stating that Concklin and the four slaves are in prison in Vincennes, and that their trial would come on in a few days. He states that they rowed seven days and nights in the skiff, and got safe to Harmony, Ind., on the Wabash river, thence to Princeton, and were conveyed to Vincennes by friends, where they were taken. The papers state, that they were all given up to the Marshal of Evansville, Indiana.

We have telegraphed to different points, to try to get some information concerning them, but failed. The last information is published in the *Times* of yesterday, though quite incorrect in the particulars of the case. Inclosed is the slip containing it. I fear all is over in regard to the freedom of the slaves. If the last account be true, we have some hope that Concklin will escape from those bloody tyrants. I cannot describe my feelings on hearing this sad intelligence. I feel ashamed to own my country. Oh! what shall I say. Surely a God of justice will avenge the wrongs of the oppressed.

Thine for the poor slave,

LEVI COFFIN.

N. B.—If thou hast any information, please write me forthwith.

CINCINNATI, 5TH MO., 11TH, 1851.

WM. STILL:—*Dear Friend*—Thy letter of 1st inst., came duly to hand, but not being able to give any further information concerning our friend, Concklin, I thought best to wait a little before I wrote, still hoping to learn something more definite concerning him.

We that became acquainted with Seth Concklin and his hazardous enterprises (here at Cincinnati), who were very few, have felt intense and inexpressible anxiety about them. And particularly about poor Seth, since we heard of his falling into the hands of the tyrants. I fear that he has fallen a victim to their inhuman thirst for blood.

I seriously doubt the rumor, that he had made his escape. I fear that he was sacrificed.

Language would fail to express my feelings; the intense and deep anxiety I felt about them for weeks before I heard of their capture in Indiana, and then it seemed too much to bear. O! my heart almost bleeds when I think of it. The hopes of the dear family all blasted by the wretched blood-hounds in human shape. And poor Seth, after all his toil, and dangerous, shrewd and wise management, and almost unheard of adventures, the many narrow and almost miraculous escapes. Then to be given up to Indianians, to these fiendish tyrants, to be sacrificed. O! Shame, Shame!!

My heart aches, my eyes fill with tears, I cannot write more. I cannot dwell longer on this painful subject now. If you get any intelligence, please inform me. Friend N. R. Johnston, who took so much interest in them, and saw them just before they were taken, has just returned to the city. He is a minister of the Covenantan order. He is truly a lovely man, and his heart is full of the milk of humanity; one of our best Anti-Slavery spirits. I spent last evening with him. He related the whole story to me as he had it from friend Concklin and the mother and children, and then the story of their capture. We wept together. He found thy letter when he got here.

He said he would write the whole history to thee in a few days, as far as he could. He can tell it much better than I can.

Concklin left his carpet sack and clothes here with me, except a shirt or two he took with him. What shall I do with them? For if we do not hear from him soon, we must conclude that he is lost, and the report of his escape all a hoax.

Truly thy friend,

LEVI COFFIN.

Stunning and discouraging as this horrible ending was to all concerned, and serious as the matter looked in the eyes of Peter's friends with regard to Peter's family, he could not for a moment abandon the idea of rescuing them from the jaws of the destroyer. But most formidable difficulties stood in the way of opening correspondence with reliable persons in Alabama. Indeed it seemed impossible to find a merchant, lawyer, doctor, planter or minister, who was not too completely interlinked with slavery to be relied upon to manage a negotiation of this nature. Whilst waiting and hoping for something favorable to turn up, the subjoined letter from the owner of Peter's family was received and is here inserted precisely as it was written, spelled and punctuated—

McKIERNON'S LETTER.

SOUTH FLORENCE ALA 6 August 1851

Mr WILLIAM STILL *No 31 North Fifth street Philadelphia*

Sir a few days sinc mr Lewis Tharenton of Tuscumbia Ala shewed me a letter dated 6 June 51 from cincinnati signd samuel Lewis in behalf of a Negro man by the name of peter Gist who informed the writer of the Letter that you ware his brother and wished an answer to be directed to you as he peter would be in philadelphi. the object of the letter was to purchis from me 4 Negros that is peters wife & 3 children 2 sons & 1 Girl the Name of said Negres are the woman Viney the (mother) Eldest son peter 21 or 2 years old second son Leven 19 or 20 years 1 Girl about 13 or 14 years old. the Husband & Father of these people once Belonged to a relation of mine by the name of Gist now