A poster in a Southern railroad station read:

"WANTED — dead or alive — Harriet Tubman. A reward of $40,000 is offered for capture."

Why was such a large reward offered for the capture of a black woman? The answer is in the story of her life.

Harriet Tubman was born a slave on a Maryland plantation in 1821. She was whipped constantly while she was a child. Harriet had scars on her neck from these beatings. Once, when she was 14, she tried to save a slave from a whipping. She stood in the way of the "boss" with the whip. The slave started to run. Then the boss picked up a heavy iron weight. He threw it at the slave, but it struck Harriet's head instead. Harriet fell to the ground. For days she lay near death. Finally Harriet grew stronger. But she never got completely well. She had a deep scar where the iron weight had hit her. For the rest of her life, she had strange spells of suddenly falling asleep.

Dash to freedom. Tubman hated being a slave. She wanted to escape to the North where there was no slavery. One night in about 1849 she and two of her brothers made a break for freedom and headed north. But the brothers

Harriet Tubman was a woman of great courage. Had she been caught on one of her journeys, she would have been enslaved again — or worse.
soon became frightened and turned back.

Tubman went on alone. She hid by day and moved north by night. She guided herself by the North Star. She was also helped by the Underground Railroad. This “railroad” was not really a railroad at all. It was a secret escape route to the North. But the “railroad” did have many “stations.” These were the homes of people who hid slaves by day and sent them on to other homes after dark. This secret network stretched from the South to the North and to Canada. With its help, Tubman finally reached Philadelphia.

Slavery had long been outlawed in Pennsylvania. Tubman was free at last. But she was not content. She wanted to help her family and other slaves to escape. Soon she became a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad. She made trip after trip to the South to lead groups of slaves to freedom. In all, she helped free more than 300 slaves. Among them were her aged parents and the rest of her family. Southern slave-owners tried again and again to capture her. Finally they offered the $40,000 reward.

Rescue work. Here is the story of one of her adventures:

Led by Harriet Tubman, 11 slaves walked through the woods. They were cold and hungry. It was so dark they couldn’t see each other. Yet Harriet Tubman led them as if the sun were shining. The slaves spoke in whispers. They were frightened — they could hear the barking of dogs. They knew that slave-catchers (men who made money catching escaped slaves) were after them.

Tubman knew of a stream nearby. It was icy cold, but Tubman told the slaves to go into the water. She knew the dogs could not smell them in the water and track them down. The slaves stayed in the water until they no longer heard the dogs barking.

They walked for days and weeks — and still they were far from freedom. Their goal on this trip was Canada. Why Canada instead of one of the Northern states? As we have seen, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850. This law was part of Henry Clay’s compromise of that year. It said that any runaway slaves caught in the North would have to be sent back South. So after 1850 the Underground Railroad ended in Canada.

The group went on together, hiding in swamps when danger was near. One day while they were hiding, Tubman began to wonder where the man from the next “station” was. He was very late. She prayed that the Underground Railroad had not let her down. Finally a man did come. He told Tubman he had a horse and wagon and food in his barn. That
night. Tubman went to the barn. There was everything the man had promised. "Praise God," the slaves said. They were another step closer to freedom.

Harriet Tubman's journeys were almost always dangerous. They took careful planning and great skill. There was usually a danger of being arrested. To reduce this danger, Tubman had one important rule. No slave should think of trying to surrender or of returning South. Any slave who did was threatened with death.

In time Tubman became well known for her rescue work. Now and then she spoke to Northern anti-slavery groups of the hazards she had faced. Among her own people, she was considered a true heroine. She knew the hardships of slavery and had the courage to help others overcome them.

**A Second Look....**

1. **What was the Underground Railroad? Why was it important?**

2. **Harriet Tubman escaped from slavery, breaking the laws of Southern states. Later she helped other slaves escape, violating the Fugitive Slave Act passed by Congress. Is it right, therefore, to call Harriet Tubman a criminal? Should she have been punished for breaking the law? Why or why not?**

3. **Pretend you are a slave living on a plantation in northern Virginia in the 1850's. You have been offered the chance to escape to Canada. You have given a lot of thought to whether you want to escape or not. You have had to consider all the benefits and drawbacks of leaving home. Now you must give a one-minute explanation for the choice you have made. What will you say?**