

The Battle of the Spurs and John Brown's Exit from Kansas

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"Mother, John Brown has started for Canada with the Missouri slaves. Are there plenty of provisions in the house?" The speaker was Daniel Sheridan, who lived on an elevation two miles southeast of Topeka, the house commanding a view of the town and country for miles around. He had just returned from the village below, where, by some mysterious system known only to the men who conducted the Underground Railroad, he had heard of the movements of John Brown, which were guarded with careful solicitude by his friends and associates. The Sheridan home was the headquarters for John Brown when he was in the vicinity of Topeka. It was a small stone house, scarcely adequate for the Sheridan family of two members, but there was always room for Brown and as many fugitive slaves as were brought that way on their long journey to the country where the driver's whip and the strong hand of the United States government could not reach them.

The time was the latter part of January, 1859. The month had been an unusually mild one, with frequent rains and little snow, but the nights were by no means comfortable for travelers, and, where there was danger of detection, slaves were always moved in the night. The Sheridans, like other New England pioneers, had done their share in winning the struggle for race freedom in Kansas. But while Kansas had been saved from the slave-traders, the institution still existed, and these courageous reformers stood ready to give up their lives if they might by that means advance the cause of universal emancipation. John Brown knew that he could trust the Sheridans. He had no fear that he would be betrayed while he was under their roof, and the house was so situated that the approach of officers of the law could be observed in time to get out of their reach, for not a day passed that there were not people on the lookout for John Brown and planning to secure his arrest. The aged emancipator had reached the period in life when his very name was a terror to the slave-owners and also to the local officers under the United States or the provisional government of Kansas. The president of the United States had set a price upon the head of Brown, and this had been supplemented by rewards by the governors of Missouri and Kansas. To the slavery sympathizers he was the red-handed murderer of innocent men who opposed him, but to the Sheridans and other anti-slavery advocates he was a benign, fatherly individual, whose voice was seldom raised except in denunciation of human slavery.

It was therefore with no degree of fear, but rather a feeling of joyful duty, that the Sheridan home was made ready for visitors. The light was kept burning and an extra supply of wood was secured, so that a roaring blaze might be kindled in the expansive fireplace at a moment's notice. Mr. Sheridan then notified two of his intimate friends to be ready to receive visitors. One of these was Jacob Willits, who lived about a mile west of the Sheridan place, and the other was Col. John Ritchie, one of the most intrepid men that ever lived, whose home was in the village, at what is now Eleventh and Madison

streets. Both these places were used as retreats for runaway slaves, as was also the William Scales residence, which stands in the heart of Topeka, near the corner of Fifth and Quincy streets.

The gray streaks of dawn were visible in the east on January 28 when the Sheridans were aroused by a pounding on their door. To the inquiry, "Who is there?" a voice answered "Friends. Are you ready to receive visitors?" The man who awakened the Sheridans was George B. Gill, who had left Garnett on January 20 as the only escort of John Brown and the ten Negroes who had been captured in a raid into Missouri on December 20, 1858.

When the wagon which carried Brown and the slaves arrived the Sheridans were waiting for them. The vehicle was what was known as a prairie-schooner, the type used by freighters, and which, while it served to conceal the contents, at the same time attracted little attention. The wagon was drawn by four horses, which had been substituted for oxen at Maj. J. B. Abbott's farm, five miles south of Lawrence, where a stop of several days was made for the purpose of selling the cattle and securing provisions for the long journey. There were twelve Negroes in the wagon when it drew up in front of the Sheridan home, a child having been born to the Daniels family while they were on the road. The Negroes had all been taken from the Hicklan, Cruise and LaRue farms, in Missouri, and Cruise had been killed in the raid. It was Jim Daniels, one of the Hicklan negroes, who had told Brown that he with his family was to be sent South, which information had moved Brown and the anti-slavery men in his party to make a stroke for the relief of Daniels. The rescue and capture of the other Negroes had apparently been an afterthought. The slaves had little clothing when they were taken, and their condition had not been improved. When they arrived at the Sheridan place they were shivering with cold, as they were half clad and some of them were without shoes. They huddled down around the fireplace while Mrs. Sheridan prepared breakfast, and Negroes and whites gathered around the little table and partook of a hearty meal. There was no caste at the Sheridan board.

After breakfast the fugitives were distributed among the trusted anti-slavery homes, and Sheridan, Ritchie and Gill went into the town to solicit shoes and clothing for the Negroes. Brown was careful not to expose himself, and he remained all day at his retreat, where he paced the floor impatiently. He spoke occasionally to Mrs. Sheridan, and to her inquiry as to when he would leave, he replied: "We must be gone to-night. There is a great work before me--greater than I can tell, and you may never see me again, but you will hear." Mrs. Sheridan did not press the gray-bearded captain for more information, and did not know that a raid into the heart of the slave territory had been planned for the year before, and had been postponed because Brown had been betrayed by Hugh Forbes, who had acted as military instructor of the insurrectionists.

At dusk the horses were hitched to the wagon, and the Negroes, who had been made more comfortable with clothing secured from the anti-slavery people, were gathered up.

The sky was overcast and the wind was cold and chilling. It was not a pleasant night for a journey, but Brown would not wait for more propitious weather. J.H. Kagi and Aaron Dwight Stevens joined the party at Topeka and followed Brown to Virginia, where, with him, they gave up their lives--one, like him, on the gallows; the other a victim of the bullets of the infuriated people of Harper's Ferry.

Jacob Willits accompanied the travelers a short distance, and helped ferry them across the Kansas River. He stood beside Brown on the ferry-boat. The wind blew along the water from the north, rippling the surface and causing the aged emancipator to shiver. Willits noticed this and said: "I don't believe that you have enough clothes for this weather." "Do not bother about me. There are others not so well supplied," replied Brown

Willits then took hold of Brown's trousers and found that he wore no under-clothing, and after they had crossed the river he induced Brown to take those he wore, the exchange being made by the roadside.

A stop was made at the home of Cyrus Packard, four miles north of Topeka, where the Negroes were unloaded and the refugees and their escort ate lunch. Holton was reached without incident at noon the following day, and the party took dinner at a hotel. They supposed that they had passed the danger point and no longer feared to travel in daylight. That afternoon, January 29, the prairie-schooner arrived at the log house of Albert Fuller, on Straight creek, six miles northwest of Holton. This was one of the stations on the Underground Railroad, and was situated in a community known to be in sympathy with the rescue of the slaves. It was agreed that the night should be spent at the Fuller cabin. The roads were bad on account of the rains, and the horses were jaded. Stevens went down to the stream after the negroes were safe in the cabin and was watering his horse, when he was suddenly confronted by two youthful deputy United States marshals on horseback.

"Have you seen any slaves around here?" asked one of the men.

"Yes," said Stevens. "There are some over there at the cabin now. I will go over with you."

The apparent frankness of Stevens threw the men off their guard, and one of them accompanied him to the cabin, while the other remained in charge of the horses. Stevens spent some time looking after his horse, to give the occupants of the house time to prepare an appropriate reception, and then he moved toward the cabin and threw open the door, saying, as he did so, "There they are. Go and take them."

The officer moved forward and found himself looking into the muzzles of two revolvers. A gruff voice said, "Come in here, and be quick about it," and he lost no time in obeying the summons. The young man was made a prisoner. The slaves were frantic with fear.

After all, their sufferings had been for nothing, and they were to be recaptured and taken back to Missouri. Brown did his best to reassure them. "You won't be caught; we will take care of you," he said. But even then horsemen were gathering about a quarter of a mile off, near the creek, and the situation was far from reassuring. The invaders were careful to keep out of rifle range, but it was evident that their purpose was to capture Brown and his charges. The two men who accosted Stevens were a part of a posse under the leadership of John P. Wood, a deputy United States marshal from Lecompton. The company was made up principally of young men from Atchison and the surrounding country, and they were probably actuated quite as much by love of adventures as hope of reward. They were on the lookout for Brown, and were notified of his arrival at Holton. The terror with which the aged abolition warrior was regarded was never better illustrated than at this time. There were thirty or more men in the Wood posse, all well armed and vested with authority of law. Opposed to them were Brown and his three associates and a few unarmed Negroes. Still the officers were afraid to attack, and Wood drew up his forces in the shelter of the timber on Straight creek and sent for reinforcements.

Meanwhile Brown was not idle. One of the men crept out of the cabin under the cover of darkness, and went to the home of a farmer named Wasson, whose anti-slavery sentiments were well known, and he was requested to go to Topeka at once and tell Col. John Ritchie that John Brown was surrounded in the Fuller cabin, on Straight creek. Wasson lost no time in complying with the request. It was Sunday morning when Wasson reached Topeka. The little congregation was gathering in the schoolhouse, which stood at Fifth and Harrison streets, and which served as a meeting-place for the Congregationalists. Colonel Ritchie was already there and was waiting with his family for the opening of the services. A commotion at the rear of the building caused the people to turn their eyes toward the door as John Armstrong, one of the Topeka anti-slavery contingent, walked in excitedly and went to Ritchie's seat and whispered in his ear. Ritchie sprang to his feet and said audibly, "There is work for us," and strode out of the church with Armstrong.

The preacher, a young man named Lewis Bodwell, who had assisted in piloting more than one load of slaves out of the state, knew that something unusual had occurred, and he followed Ritchie and Armstrong. He soon returned to the church and made this strange announcement: "There will be no service to-day at this place. We will adjourn to the river bank."

The people filed hurriedly out of the schoolhouse and it was not long until the village was the scene of suppressed excitement and activity. The women were busy preparing provisions and clothing, while the men made a hurried canvass to find who could best leave home on what they knew to be a perilous journey. There were no protests from the women, though they knew that when they said good-bye to their husbands and brothers it might be for the last time. Some degree of secrecy was maintained, because there were

government officers in Topeka, and it was not deemed wise to let them know that a party was being organized to go to the rescue of John Brown, or even that John Brown was in the country. Much difficulty was experienced in finding enough horses, and when the dozen men left Topeka for Holton, some of them were on foot. In the party were Thomas Archer, John Armstrong, and Maj. Thomas W. Scudder, who still live in Topeka. They traveled all night, and the next forenoon, January 31, they arrived at Holton, where a half-dozen men and boys, including T.J. Anderson, now of Topeka, joined the Ritchie party, and they pushed on as rapidly as possible toward the Fuller cabin.

When they were within sight of the house they saw Kagi, Gill and Stevens hitching the horses to the wagon, and upon their arrival Brown was supervising the transfer of the Negroes to the conveyance. Across Straight creek, a half mile away, were the horses of the Wood posse, and a line of dark mounds nearer the stream which marked the places where they had thrown up rude rifle-pits commanding the ford and the road leading to it. It had been raining, and the creek was high, and the Fuller crossing was known to be exceedingly bad.

"What do you propose to do, captain?" asked one of the body-guard.

"Cross the creek and move north," he responded, and his lips closed in that familiar, firm expression which left no doubt as to his purpose.

"But, captain, the water is high and the Fuller crossing is very bad. I doubt if we can get through. There is a much better ford five miles up the creek," said one of the man who joined the rescuers at Holton.

The old man faced the guard, and his eyes flashed. "I have set out on the Jim Lane road," he said, "and I intend to travel it straight through, and there is no use to talk of turning aside. Those who are afraid may go back, but I will cross at the Fuller crossing. The Lord has marked out a path for me and I intend to follow it. We are ready to move."

The members of the party exchanged glances of uneasiness, but when their eyes turned to the old leader he had already started toward the ford, and one by one they fell in behind him, and not a member of the party turned back. There were forty-five entrenched men waiting in their rifle-pits across the creek. Their guns were in their hands and directly in front of them, and not 100 yards away was the road leading to the Fuller crossing. They saw the little cavalcade of twenty-one men leave the cabin, preceded by a tall, lank figure, and they waiting in their entrenchments for their coming. The abolitionists moved out into the road and went straight toward the ford. Did the men who were waiting know that with a single volley they could wipe John Brown and his guard from the face of the earth? They certainly did, but what force was it that kept their fingers from their triggers? Perhaps the moral courage of the old man had paralyzed their arms.

John Brown appeared utterly oblivious of the presence of Wood and his forces. He looked straight ahead, and if the deputy marshal and his men had been ants they could not have received less attention from him. On toward the ford went the little company of Kansans. They did not fire a shot and not a gun was raised. As the advance-guard reached the ford there was a commotion in the rifle-pits on the opposite bank. A man or two sprang up and ran toward the horses, which were tied not far off, and in less time than it takes to tell it the entire marshal's party was in a wild panic, each member trying to outstrip the others in an effort to reach the horses. In their terror one or two of the men grasped the tails of the horses and were dragged over the prairie to a safe distance by the frightened animals.

The Topeka men charged across the creek to give chase, and found four men standing at their rifle-pits, apparently waiting for them. They had thrown their guns on the ground and stood with folded arms, awaiting the charge.

"Do you surrender?" shouted Colonel Ritchie.

"Yes, you may take us," said one of the men coolly. "We simply wanted to show you that there were some men in the Wood party who were not afraid of you."

The men were made prisoners, and their horses, which were tied near by, were also taken. The heavy emigrant wagon became mired at the ford and it required several hours' work to get it through the creek. Then the march toward Tabor, Iowa, was resumed. The mounted members of the Topeka party, including Ritchie and Armstrong, accompanied Brown as far as Seneca and the rest turned back.

Thus ended the "Battle of the Spurs," which received its name from Richard J. Hinton, who belonged to the force of Eastern correspondents in Kansas. As spurs were the most effective weapons used, the title is not altogether inappropriate. Not a shot was fired on either side. If this encounter had not had its farcical termination there would have been no John Brown raid at Harper's Ferry in October of the same year, the world might never have known John Brown, the emancipator, and perhaps the institution of human slavery might have waited many years for its death-blow.