

The Underground Railroad

Thoughts suggested upon hearing a Lecture delivered by Edwin H.

Coates,¹ at Mt. Lebanon, N.Y.²

BY CECILIA DEVYR

Were its directors monied kings
Who buy the statesman from his trust?
Or politicians of the rings
That chain the Nation in the dust?
Nay, they were *Men* and *Women* too,
Whose souls were roused by slavery's crimes;
God's inspiration thrilled them through,
And nerved them for those dangerous times.
They had no leaders and no *plan*
Save that which reached them from above;
'Twas love to God and love to man
That made their work effective prove.
On them no Congress e'er bestowed
In bounteous boons the public lands,
And no appropriations flowed
To *them* through great official hands.
They had their Charter from the Lord;
Their bonds were sacred in His sight;
But slavery's base and hireling horde
Encompassed them with watchful might.
The *law*, but it was law indeed,
And not infringement bold and strong?
Can a *Republic* plant the seed
That bears the bitter fruits of wrong?
They *called* it law – the cruel code
That gave to slavery its desire;
They *called* it law, until its load
Exploded in rebellion fire.
It was the proud aggressor's will,
And not the Nation's own decree;

¹ Edwin H. Coates was a well-known Philadelphia abolitionist and operated an Underground Railroad station at Sixth and Cherry Streets. After the Civil War, he was a popular speaker.

² Site of the historic Mount Lebanon Shaker community, established in 1787.

Her olden edict glitters still,
That all are equal born, and free,
A sword of state that vengeance flamed,
Dark prison walls that hugged their gloom,
Fines bloodhounds, – tyrannies unnamed –
Combined to work for Freedom's doom.
But up and down through every State
This grand, mysterious railroad wound;
Its baffled foes in rage and hate
Declared that it was Underground.
For through the solitude and crowd
It was concealed from selfish eyes;
'Twas like the pillar and the cloud,
It guided and it wrought disguise.
Who saw the fire that moved the car?
Who knew the signal of alarm?
They passed it close, to seek afar,
Whose hearts were brooding aught of harm.
Oft from his hut, through storm and rain,
Came forth some ancient, tottering slave,
To be the foremost on the train,
The flying fugitive to save.
It always bore its trembling freight
Through shadows of the darkest night,
And cleft the folded glooms of fate
With but the North Star for a light.
No gladness, only tears and prayers
And anguish passed along that road;
Wild, maddening fears and crushing cares,
That sent the simple hearts to God.
The train that sped the slave away
Through solitudes and busy marts
Still rolled its wheels by night and day
On Abolition hearts.
They knew its weight, they knew its strain,
And nobly kept their solemn pledge
To bear the burden and the pain,
And be for God the opening wedge.
A future outline, rough and dim,
Grave bodings round the bondsman thrown,
But childlike faith sufficed for him;
He *felt*, he *knew*, the yet unknown;
For e'en friend Whittier ne'er divined
The end, how distant nor how nigh;
But said with firm prophetic mind
That "Every wrong shall die;

For laws of changeless justice bind
Oppressor with oppressed,
And close as sin and suffering joined,
We march to fate abreast.”
O! as we read these words that gleam,
And view that miracle – the Past,
We know that God with even beam
Shall mete our measure at the last;
For when the South her judgment bore,
Did East and West and North escape?
She had the streaming crimson gore,
And *they* the sable crape.
Both symbolize the parted breath
F ghastly soldiers on the field,
Who died when slavery met its death;
When cannon-balls the compact sealed.
And still with Whitter, our trust
O’er sin and sorrow rises high;
“We only know that God is just,
And every wrong shall die.”³
Toil on, brave workers, “Mind the light;”⁴
The Orient flashes o’er the sky;
By *that great victory, won at night,*
Take courage – “Every wrong shall die.”

³ Fragment quoted from John Greenleaf Whittier, “Song of the Negro Boatmen,” lines 59-60. *The Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1892) 269.

⁴ Fragment quoted from Whittier, “The Shadow and the Light,” citing St. Augustine, *Soliloquies*, Book 7. Whittier, *Poetical Works*, 234.