

CANADA'S PART IN FREEING THE SLAVE.

BY FRED LONDON, M.A.

Historians of the anti-slavery movement in the United States have, for the most part overlooked the very great measure of assistance that came to that cause from the geographical location of the free British provinces to the north and from the attitude of mind of the people of those provinces with regard to the blacks escaping out of bondage. To those in this country who lived during the years immediately preceding the Civil War, or who since that period have had anything to do with older coloured people, the term "Underground Railroad" is not the mysterious term that it is to a younger generation. When Prof. Siebert, of Ohio State University, one of the eminent historians of the United States, can make the statement that "the underground railroad was one of the greatest forces which brought on the Civil War and destroyed slavery," we on this side of the border may properly add that during a large part of the period of its activity Canada was practically essential to the success of the underground system.

Though slavery was legal in all the thirteen original states of the union at some time or another, it was natural that in the group of northern states it should die out quickly. It was excluded by Congress from the old northwest territory by the ordinance of 1787, thus creating a group of states around the Great Lakes that were never to know slavery. By 1820 the republic had been divided by a more or less irregular geographical line, north of which were the free states and south of it the slave states. It was in that year that the first state was created west of the Mississippi River, Missouri, and though lying as far north as southern Illinois, free, it came in as a slave state. From that time until the end of the Civil War one of the great issues in the nation's politics was the control of the new west, should it be free or slave. Prior to 1830 or 1835 there had been many in the south to whom the evils of slavery were something to be rid of and abolition societies actually existed in the south before they did in the north. But from 1830 on there came a new teaching in the south, the doctrine that slavery is a positive good, ordained of God, for the benefit of the black race. Economic conditions were changed, too, by the spread of cotton growing. The old domestic slavery, bad though it might be, was a mild evil compared with the conditions that came when huge cotton plantations demanded vast hordes of slaves and there grew up the domestic slave trade. Virginia, the mother of presidents, became a vast breeding ground and her aristocratic families made fortunes in the selling of men, women and children to the far southern plantations.

From the very earliest days slave owners had experienced severe losses by their slaves running away. As early as the first half of the seventeenth century there are found laws and regulations for the return from one colony to another of fugitives. In the Federal Constitution adopted at Philadelphia in 1787 there is a clause which reads:—

"No person held to service or labour in one state under the laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in consequence of any law or regulation therein, be discharged from such service or labour, but shall be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service or labour may be due."