

Lancaster

THADDEUS STEVENS

PART I

When I was coming up in northern Vermont, no one expected much of Thad Stevens. I was smart enough, did very well in school, but I had a lot to overcome. My father took to drink, couldn't keep a job, and eventually abandoned his family. Later, he got himself killed in the War of 1812. My mother was left with raising four children, working as a laundress. She could barely keep food on the table. And then, there was the clubfoot I was born with, causing not a small amount of guilt for my parents and shame for me. I was striking-handsome, could get the attention of any girl I chose, until she looked down at what dragged at the end of my foot. All in all, I may have despaired of finding a sweetheart, but never that I would one day rise above my life circumstances. Too little notice was made in Vermont of my clear determination to march through life, same as a man with matching feet would.

When I got myself admitted to Dartmouth College, near everybody around figured I'd run into a wall there. Those rich boys would have none of me, and send me hobbling back home. I discuss only with my Lord the torment I endured to finish my schooling. I sure didn't discuss it with my childhood acquaintances. After school, I chose not to return to Vermont but headed south, to York, Pennsylvania. (In Vermont, they didn't hear of me, until the newspapers began to write about this "knife-tongued congressman from Pennsylvania," Thaddeus Stevens. I heard they especially liked to read what I had to say about southern slave-owners, who were trying to take over Washington. But I'm getting ahead of my story.)

I was twenty-three when I began teaching at an academy in York, and reading law at night. I calculated I needed one year to ready myself, and when that time period was up, I presented myself for the bar examination. And the County Bar Association turned around and passed a resolution barring anyone from the examination who had not studied law full-time. They sought to thwart me because I would not chummy up to any of the

big lawyers in York. Just wasn't in me to lick boots. I went right back at them: I went across the line to Bel Air, Maryland. To get my law degree there, all I needed was the time to get there, the answers to a few questions, and two bottles of Madeira wine for the examining judge.

I hung my shingle in Gettysburg, in 1816. Being new in town, and to the law, my cases were few. I even lost my first capital case. Here's the true story. I argued my client could not be guilty, because he was insane. Unfortunately, the jury had never heard of such a defense. Despite the verdict, I did earn a reputation for cleverness and audacity. Clients flocked to me. By 1821, I was one of the leading lawyers in Pennsylvania.

That was the year one Norman Bruce, walked into my office. In hindsight, I wish on that day I had been visiting friends in York, and never laid eyes on this Maryland slave-owner. It seems Norman Bruce had leased a slave, Charity Butler, to a seamstress who made frequent trips into Pennsylvania. And every time, she took Charity. Well, Bruce never knew Charity to be rebellious or even ornery. But after three years of passing back and forth from Maryland to Pennsylvania, one day Charity announces that she's free, and she weren't going back to Maryland. This slave woman then had the gall to talk on the law. The slave-owner had come to Thad to find out something. *If a slave resides in Pennsylvania for a total of six months can that slave go free?* Charity had counted every time she came to Pennsylvania, and when the total reached 186, she sat on a bench outside the millinery store, and would not budge. Didn't run, nor hide. No, this damned slave got herself a wage-job in the millinery store.

I informed the slave-owner that his Charity had stated Pennsylvania law correctly. Now, I should have left his counsel at that. After all, I was from the 'live-free-or-die state.' My own hardscrabble childhood should have made me feel something for this poor woman. Lord, she was, in her way, just as clever and determined as I was. But I took the case, fought it up to the state supreme court, and as was my habit, I won it. My argument was simple: Unless a single visit exceeded six months, the slave could not claim freedom.

I didn't talk much about the Charity Butler case, once the court's ruling came down. I just retired to my office, and sat, watching the last of the champagne bubbles dissolve in the glass I could not bring to my lips. The uneasiness I had felt, even before the ruling, was in fact the realization that I had lost. I was lost. If I was not now one of the powerful who plagued the defenseless, I was maybe even worse, their willing instrument.

It cannot be stated that by the time I put the cork back into the bottle, and swung my ungainly club foot onto to sidewalk and into the night air, I was walking as a committed abolitionist. No man changes completely, through one despairing night. A man does not lose himself to winning, heedless of the terrible, swift consequences of his victory—*and of a sudden* reverse his nature.

What history will tell you is the following. The word spread, from mouth to ear, stationmaster to runaway, Negro to Negro. *If ever you are caught and jailed in Pennsylvania, there is a lawyer who will come to your aid. You will know him by his limp.*

PART II (Buchanan)

Two weeks after the nation elected Abraham Lincoln president every state in the deep south began secession proceedings. That inept, lame duck, President Buchanan, had not an inkling of what was going on. I was ill in Lancaster at the time, and could not attend the session of Congress. The most I could do was to send forth a brief message: "I do not care to be present while the process of humiliating the nation I love is going on. Buchanan is a very traitor!"

PART III

Abe Lincoln surprised me when he announced his Emancipation Proclamation, in September of 1862. It was not so much that he was doing what was morally right. He just took so very long in placing the proclamation before the American people--a full sixteen months after the start of the war. And during that entire period, I had dogged him to

exercise his war power, and free all the slaves, not just the ones in the confederacy. Whenever I could, I placed myself on his schedule of meetings. The president later admitted that I haunted him. Wherever he went, and whatever way he turned, I was on his trail.

When my personal persuasions didn't seem to move him much, I introduced partial emancipation measures in the House of Representatives, to prepare the way for full emancipation. In December of '61, I introduced a resolution asking President Lincoln to free every slave who aided in the rebellion. The president's response? Why, one week later, he suggested in his Message to Congress, that if the loyal border states, like Maryland and Delaware, agreed to abolish slavery by *1900*, the federal government would *compensate their loss*.

It seemed to me that Lincoln would never use his war power to destroy slavery, and that the war could end with the institution intact. I knew in his heart, the president wanted an end to slavery, but much more than that, he wanted to save the union. If he could save the union without freeing one slave, he would do it, and if he could save the union by freeing all the slaves, he would do that.

However, were slavery allowed to stand, in any form, we would not have a United States of America. On January 22, 1862, to the House of Representatives, I said to my colleagues, and to President Lincoln, "If you win the current war, and leave *one germ* of slavery in the south, that germ will grow, and soon overrun the whole south -- again. Your peace would be a curse. You would have expended countless treasures and untold lives in vain. If this current war does not end slavery, one day it will have to be fought still again."

I like to think my speech, in some small way, prompted President Lincoln, finally, to draft his Proclamation of Emancipation. He did so at the end of January. But, for my life, I do not know why he waited nine months to present it to the American people.

PART III

Only the rarest of men can discern how his contemporaries truly look upon him, and none of us has a prayer's chance of controlling how men in the future will look back upon us. My history has been written in my passionate pursuit of my beliefs, before, and during, our tragic civil war, and most especially during the difficult years of its aftermath. As a lawyer I aided fugitive slaves in the Pennsylvania courts...was steadfast in my aid of abolitionists...shamelessly badgered President Lincoln until he saw the moral wisdom of recruiting Negro men to join his white fellow in defending the Union. My Civil Rights bill bestowed citizenship onto five million of our countrymen. And more: Without my efforts, Congress would not have passed the Thirteenth Amendment, or the Fourteenth amendment, which brought due process into the Constitution, for all citizens. My legacy to this United States, as is my time in her service, is near its completion.

But as I straddle this place in time, between a past fully lived and a future that is dwindling to nothing, I insist on one thing: Thaddeus Stevens was one who never rose to any eminence, and who only courted the low ambition to have it said that he had striven to ameliorate the condition of the poor, the lowly, the downtrodden of every race and language and color.