



Tremont Temple Baptist Church

Chapter Fifty-eight *January 1, 1863*

Boston

Messengers lined the street leading from the telegraph office to Tremont Temple Baptist Church, ready to relay news that a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation had been sent. Many in the integrated audience had waited all day, but when light faded into dusk, and dusk into darkness with still no word, their hopes began to wane.

Frederick Douglass arrived at Tremont in the early evening, joining another former fugitive, William Wells Brown, on the stage.

During the first hour, they and other platform guests delivered speeches to the enthusiastic, yet restless audience. Nine o'clock came and no news arrived. The crowd's ardor began to fade. Douglass, along with Brown, a prolific novelist, orator, and playwright, continued with speeches and songs, hoping to bolster the throng. At 10 o'clock, and still no word, an elderly lady loudly proclaimed, "He's not going to sign it." Douglass refuted her words, saying, "Abraham Lincoln may be slow; Abraham Lincoln may desire peace, even at the price of leaving our terrible national sore untouched, to fester for generations, but Abraham Lincoln is not the man to reconsider, retract and contradict words and purposes solemnly proclaimed over his own signature."

But when another hour elapsed, Douglass also began to doubt, remembering the threat of Union soldiers to throw down their weapons before they'd fight to set Negroes free. Democrats had won seven November state elections, including Illinois. Kentucky's legislators vowed the Border States would leave the Union if the President signed the decree.

Douglass worried that conservative Republicans had pressured Lincoln to abort the Proclamation. He leaned in and whispered to Brown, "I wish Lincoln had made the Preliminary Proclamation effective in September instead of this long, conditional wait."

“So do I,” said Brown. “But Lincoln’s party, as far as emancipation goes, is like Jacob serving Laben for Rachel. Hopefully we don’t wake up one morning to find we have Leah.”

“The suspense is painful,” he muttered, slumping back in his chair.

The abolitionists may have doubted Lincoln’s intentions, but the rebels were convinced the Proclamation was a done deal that would create disturbances among the blacks. Confederate soldiers wrote to their superiors, begging leave to go home and protect their families. “The Negroes are making their brags,” they’d written, “saying that by January 1 they’ll be as free as we are.” Indeed, the grapevine *had* alerted slaves all across the South that the Proclamation existed and they were confident it would be issued as promised.

Washington City

On January 1, President Lincoln awoke to a dry, sunlit morning; but his arduous agenda held no cheer. His day had begun early, with a contentious meeting between General Burnside, General Halleck, and War Secretary Stanton. Lincoln’s previous attempt to resolve differences between the men had required his utmost diplomacy, and he’d manage to keep the war on track. But not today. After hours of discussion, nothing had been resolved. The meeting ended at nine a.m., as argumentative as it had begun. The parties left in a huff, agreeing only to meet again later that day.

The president turned to the next thing on his agenda—the Emancipation Proclamation. He reviewed its wordings, meticulously including his Cabinet’s suggestions. After fine-tuning the document, he sent it to the State Department for the official calligraphy.

At ten forty-five, as Lincoln dressed for the Executive Mansion’s traditional New Year’s Day Reception, Secretary of State William Seward delivered the Proclamation. After he’d hastily signed it, the superscription caught the president’s eye: *In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my name and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.*

“Seward,” he said, “I don’t like the word *name* here; that’s more fitting for a treaty than a presidential proclamation.”

“I agree,” Seward replied. “It’s a pity we didn’t notice it before.”

“Substitute *hand* for *name*; I think that will be more appropriate.”

Just then a presidential aide entered the room. “It’s eleven o’clock, sir. The guests are arriving.”

“I’ll have the Proclamation redone,” said Seward. “It’ll be ready when you return.”

“Thank you,” said Lincoln, hurrying downstairs to his next executive duty. He wouldn’t be able to sign the document until after the reception.

Lincoln greeted his cabinet, the generals, and foreign diplomats in the Blue Room. They left at noon, when it was time for the public hordes to arrive. As the Marine band played, the dictates of protocol kept him shaking hands for three hours.

It was past two o’clock when he returned to the Cabinet Room. The Proclamation was spread out on the desk and Seward stood nearby, waiting. Lincoln sat down, his hand so tired he could barely hold the pen.

“I’ve been greeting callers and shaking hands since seven o’clock this morning,” he said, “my arm is stiff. But this signature will be looked at very closely; if they decide my hand trembled, they will say ‘he had some *compunction*’. But anyway, it is going to be done.” Then he slowly and carefully wrote his name at the bottom of the Proclamation. “I never was so certain in my life that I was doing right by signing this paper.” The signature turned out to be uncharacteristically firm and bold. He looked up, smiling. “That will do,” he said.

Lincoln had made no effort to be ceremonial that day. He didn’t convene his Cabinet and no delegations of abolitionists or Negroes were present; he’d visited no slave family, nor did he make a speech. A few staff members wandered into the room—curious witnesses to history.

After Seward signed his name, the document was taken to the State Department where the great seal was affixed and duplicates made. The Emancipation Proclamation was then deposited in the Government Archives and copies given to the press. But Lincoln’s day was far from over.

The act to admit West Virginia into the Union was waiting for his signature, as well as an agreement to provide a freedmen’s colony on an island near Haiti. Then there was the meeting with the delegation of anti-slavery leaders, demanding that the Proclamation be issued as an act of justice rather than a military measure. Another meeting with Burnside, Halleck, and Stanton was of utmost importance. His *day* extended far into the night.

It was late when Lincoln made his regular visit to the War Department’s telegraph room. A young telegraph operator, Edward Rosewood, greeted him then hurried back to his work. Curious, the President went over to see what he was sending out. It was the Emancipation Proclamation. He watched for a few minutes then calmly strolled over to his favorite chair, the place he’d written most of the Preliminary Proclamation, and propped his feet on the desk. It was, for him, the end of a long, satisfying day.

Boston

It was almost midnight when a messenger ran into Tremont Temple shouting, “It’s on the wires! It’s coming!” The audience went wild as the cheers of three thousand shook the hall. All kinds of emotions immediately went into play—tears, praises, hysterical sobs and joyful shouts.

The printed document arrived and the pandemonium quieted down. Douglass addressed the crowd after the Proclamation was read. “I am glad the people of the country are finding out that the color of a man’s skin does not disqualify him from being a citizen of the United States. The Emancipation Proclamation has changed the war from mere strife for territory and dominion, into a contest of civilization against barbarism. I rejoice in the deliverance of our race from bondage.”

Caught up in the euphoria, Douglass initially only saw the Proclamation’s antislavery side. Later, upon closer examination, he realized the document’s authority was limited to geographical and military boundaries and the abolition of slavery was presented as a military necessity to save the Union. But Douglass was not dismayed, saying, “I approve the spur-wisdom of Paddy, who thought if he could get one side of his horse to go, he could trust the speed of the other side to follow.”

Although the Emancipation Proclamation did not actually free slaves in the Confederate-held states and did not address slavery in the loyal Border States, it did have three positive effects: First,

Union-held lands were free-soil country and the army was legally bound to maintain freedom within them. Next, the edict demonstrated to the world that the United States was committed to the rights of labor and to ending slavery. Finally, nearly all blacks regarded the document as an official declaration of liberation, inspiring thousands to flee the plantations, putting their much-needed labor at the Union's disposal. The foundation of slavery's peculiar institution rapidly began to crumble.

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