



Part II Chapter 13 Let Freedom Ring

“Isn’t it a fine day? Thomas asked Bridget. It was July 4, 1834, a Friday, their first Independence Day. He had been feeling depressed and was looking forward to a holiday. It was understood that workers, even cartmen, would be allowed take the day off, since it was, after all, the nation’s birthday. He had heard about the celebrations and wanted to see as many as possible. He had invited Tim and Betty and Michael and Peggy to join them. They were about to set out when Bridget decided not to go. She was in her eighth month, wasn’t she, and wouldn’t the walk and all that standing around in all those crowds be too much for her? Didn’t he remember St. Patrick’s Day? She would stay home, thank you; she had work to do.

The work she referred to was a dress she was making for Mrs. Daly, a simple street dress. Mrs. Daly had sent her a message with Mr. Leary saying that her mother usually bought her clothes from Worth’s in Paris, but she wanted something simpler. Could Bridget pick out some nice silk material and make her a street dress?

From Mr. Leary Bridget had got the address on Pearl Street of the Tappans shop, the silk merchants he had told them about. There she had found a rich assortment of silks from the East, and had sent several samples of materials for Mrs. Daly’s approval. She was now finishing work on a gold-striped dress, and eager to finish it for Mrs. Daly’s final fitting. Thomas would have to set off for the harbor by himself—with his friends. He could tell her about it.

The ceremonies began about 9 a.m with a salute of dressed ships parading past a reviewing stand in Battery Park. From the grandest to the lowliest, ships of every sort were assembled, flying their colors: great merchant ships from London and Liverpool and other foreign ports, naval and coast guard vessels, all dressed, with flags run up their rigging; even ferries, tugs, schooners, sloops, and fisherman’s skiffs were dressed, at least with American flags, to take part. As they slowly sailed past, heading up the Hudson River, guns fired salutes, bands played.

The procession was slow and stately, so Thomas and his friends had time to feel the importance of an event that could gather so many great ships together. He felt himself swell with emotion. “It was worth it coming to Americay just to see this,” he said to the others. “If only Bridget could be here, as it’s on account of her I’ve come.”

“You’re lucky there’s not a cholera epidemic, as there was my first year. The celebration was low key then; no crowds were allowed to gather,” Michael told him.

The great ships were followed by innumerable sloops, all parading up the Hudson. The crowd grew bored, and began to head up Broadway toward City Hall Park where there would be a picnic and speakers.



Milling about on the lawn or sitting on the lawn eating lunches, the crowd listened to band playing patriotic songs. Then the speeches began. City leaders and politicians spoke on and on, quoting the Declaration of Independence--a large copy of which was hung up for view; recalling how unique America was--practically a new nation, born on this very day, July 4, 1776, only fifty-eight years ago--Jefferson and Adams had died only eight years earlier; a noble experiment in freedom-- founded on the principles of liberty and equality

After the speeches the band led the crowd in singing patriotic songs—starting off “Hail Columbia.” This song was sung so many times that Thomas learned the chorus:

*Firm, united let us be,
Rallying round our liberty,
As a band of brothers joined,
Peace and safety we shall find.*

Next most frequently played was the song he liked best-- “America,”—using the tune of “God Save the King”— a great joke on the English wasn’t it?

*My country ‘til of thee
Sweet land of liberty,
Of thee I sing.
Land where my fathers died,
Land of the Pilgrim’s pride,
From every mountain side,
Let freedom ring.*

When Thomas heard those words—“sweet land of liberty,” he felt a great surge of pride. Hadn’t he done a fine, brave thing in coming here, in search of liberty himself? “Freedom,” “Let freedom ring” Banners with eagles, with the word “Freedom,” flags everywhere. “Maybe Bridget could work an eagle or a flag into one of her embroideries,” he told Betty.



Another favorite was “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Thomas thought he recognized the tune of a popular English drinking song. It described a battle with

the English in the War of 1812. It was just grand to think the English were defeated a second time by his new country.

Later, when he described the day to Bridget, he thanked her, for it was all owing to her that he'd come. She reminded him that it was the other way round. "It was your idea, Tom O'Shaughnessy, and you know it. You're a fine brave man for coming."

After supper the men set out to hear the Abolitionists speak at the Chatham Street Chapel. They were surprised to find the theatre already full when they arrived, so they would have to stand near the door in the back. They could see that the congregation included blacks and whites and even women, all mixed and sitting together, a sight that Thomas had never observed before. In Five Points, the former slaves stayed by themselves, in areas of their own. Thomas realized that he had seen no blacks at the celebrations that morning at the harbor, or at the park in the afternoon. In fact, wasn't this the first gathering he had seen attended by any blacks? How were they going to celebrate Independence Day, he asked himself.

After some introductory remarks from Mr. Finney the pastor, he introduced the speakers—the very Dr. Cox, and Lewis Tappan about whom Tim had told them, who had stirred up all the trouble recently. They did not sound any of the happy notes that Thomas had heard from earlier speakers. Their task seemed to be to indict the country that boasted of securing liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all, yet saw nothing wrong in denying liberty to a quarter of its people. They told of men and women who had been brought to America not of their own free will but dragged from their families by greedy procurers, then sold in the slave markets of America. Thomas had not thought of it that way.

Dr. Cox reminded the audience that while they were celebrating independence from England, their mother country, today--liberty they had valued so much they had fought for-- England had abolished slavery in 1823. "We, her supposedly freedom-loving American children refuse freedom to more than two million of our own people. Maybe we could still learn a lesson from our former mother," he added dryly.

Standing in the back, Thomas heard murmurs coming from some members of the audience. "Do not praise England to our ears. Aren't her hands soiled with our blood?" They did not like to hear anything bad said about America, especially in comparison with the English, it seemed.

Eventually these protestors stood up and shouted back at the speakers, "No, we shall never abolish slavery!" "Let's have no talk of abolition!" "We are free to own slaves if we wish." Thomas knew that was not right; New York had abolished slavery"

The protestors began to threaten the speakers and force their way toward the stage, ganging up on black members of the audience and heading toward the speakers on the stage. Tim signaled for them to leave; others were beginning to head for the exit as well.

The meeting was over—he could hear the pastor adjourning the meeting, calling for peace, asking that there be no violence.

“So that’s an abolitionist meeting,” he said to the others. “I’m glad we came, but it looks like a hopeless cause. I doubt if they’ll ever obtain it.”

After that day, Thomas stopped feeling that America wasn’t treating him right. He wasn’t leading the life he dreamed, but he had come voluntarily and could quit or even return whenever he chose. He was even being paid to work. Things could be a lot worse.