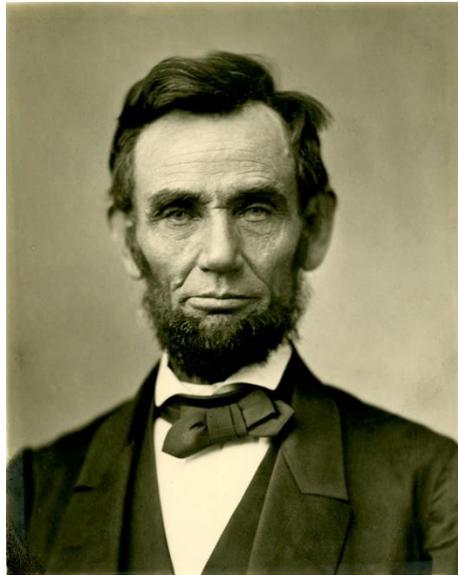


Chapter Five

The Boy Who Saved America, 1815



Abraham Lincoln
photograph by
Matthew Brady

Have ever more men killed one another, brother and brother than in this greatest conflict and here upon our shores where we claim to hold the lamp of liberty for the world to see?

Abr'am Lincoln asked that question, and I writ it 'xactly like he said it. O' course when we is kids growin' up in Kentucky, Abe didn' talk like that. He must o' picked his lingo up from the book learnin' he got afte' Tom Lincoln moved his fam'ly north t' Indiana. Abe is my best friend when we is kids in Kentucky, but kids grows up 'n go they own ways. I'm still farmin' the same plot o' land my daddy did when me 'n Abe is kids, 'n ain't got much more 'an I had then neither.

Abe took a different road, 'n when he walked north with his family, I neve' thought one day he'd be the Presiden' of these United States. Truth is, if it weren' for Abe, I wouldn' be sittin' here tellin' you I lived in these United States, cause they prob'ly wouldn' be united no more. Nope. If it weren' for my friend, Abe, this country prob'ly gone t' hell in a han'basket.

O' course, you prob'ly know that. What you don't know is, if it weren' for me, Abe never woulda made that walk north, 'n I don' believe they is another man coulda saved this nation like Abe done, rest his soul.

We is friends 'n first met up when we is learnin' 'r letters at Mister Riney's ABC school, 'course most ever'one call't it, Mister Riney's blab school. You see, we didn't have no books, well, jus' one, a spellin' book it was, 'n Abe was real good at it. The other kids call't Abe a leather-head 'cause Mister Riney always be braggin' on how good Abe is doin' 'n how come the res' o' us ain't doin' as well. 'Spose that is some kind o' indication that Abe had a special gift with words 'n other matters o' learnin'.

We is both six-years old. Abe got a sister, Sarah. Had a brother, too, but that kid died 'fore he took his first steps. I got three sisters 'n a baby brother. Abe 'd rather be with me th'n his sister, though she is nice enough, 'n I'd rather be spendin' what time I got with Abe, so even when they ain't no school, we get together, but only after 'r chores be done. That's the rule 'n we made it, not 'r pa's, if that's what you be thinkin'.

Most days when me 'n Abe is done with 'r chores, we'd take to the Bardstown-Green Rive' Turnpike, which weren't far from his place in the west, 'n my place in the east. Prob'ly not much more 'n a few miles from each other, we was. I'd walk west 'n Abe 'd walk east. We had no set place to meet. Wherever we met, we met. Some days, he might walk a bit faster than I would. Other days, it was me what put down more steps walkin' toward Tom Lincoln's farm at Knob Creek.

Knob Creek gonna play a big part in my story. As I look back on those days, I know that walkin' down that Bardstown-Green Rive' Turnpike made a diff'rence in Abe's life, made 'im look diff'rent at things, particularly the way he looked at Negroes. I heard men, women, too, call them Negroes some bad things, and people treat 'em worse than they treat they own dogs. 'Course I know men what love they dogs mor'n they love a woman. I 'spect I'm a little like that m'self, but no man got the right t' talk down t' 'nother man 'n call 'im disrespec'ful things. They's days when that 'xactly what we heard on the turnpike, words o' disrespec' thrown at other men.

One day, we seen a line o' black men all tied one t' the other with a rope 'round they necks. They's all walkin' slow, like they's shufflin' 'n not real happy 'bout whey they's headed. A man with an unkempt beard rode a horse at the head o' the line sayin' nothin', but playin' a Jew's harp. 'Nother white man, a young boy somewhat older 'an us walked behind 'em with a birch switch in his hand. One o' two o' the black men has

marks on theys backs. Me 'n Abe 'spected them marks come from that there birch switch.

As they come upon us, the man in front rein in his horse, a shiny black stallion with wild eyes, 'n tell them black men t' walk slow down t' the creek that ran next t' the road. "Let the boy have his fill first," he says, meanin' the white boy with 'im, "Then you darkies get you a drink 'n get back up here. We got a ways t' go 'fore sundown."

The man on the horse seen us standin' unde' the shade of a tall elm tree. "Whatchoo lookin' at?" he calls out 'n sends a spit o' chaw in 'r d'rection. He pulls a bottle from unde' his jacket and takes a long draft. It w'n't water, but likker, I 'spect.

Afte' he has his fill, the boy waves the black men down to the water. The boss man pulls his rifle from his saddle so they all seen he has a gun, 'n he's itchin' t' use it. He watch them black men close while they falls t' they knees and get a long drink. One o' 'em tries to piss, but he can't. I 'spect he done sweat out ev'r drop o' piss he had in 'im on that long walk.

The boy stands next t' us. "You mus' live 'roun here. They call me Rooste' 'cause I doan need much sleep. That be the Wolf," he nods toward the boss man. "Doan take much 'magination to figure out why they call 'im Wolf. He's a mean man."

Rooste' strikes the first man up from the stream with the switch as he walks past. The black man jerks, but utters no sound.

"Why'd you do that?" Abe asks.

"Cause I can," the boys laughs.

As Rooste' raises the switch t' strike another, Abe grabs his wrist and stays his hand. The boy is older 'n Abe, but Abe is taller. Rooste' tries to break free, but Abe holds that wrist in his big hand. The Wolf raises an eyebrow and growls, "Set the boy free."

Abe hesitates and then releases Rooste's wrist.

"Why you do that?" Rooste' whines as he rubs his wrist.

Abe continues to stare at Wolf and answers, "Because I can."

From the look of 'im, I 'spct the Wolf don't often have a body stand up 'n talk sass to 'im, 'n I think that's what Abe jus' did. "Easy, now Abe," I whispers.

"Whatchoo, say, kid?" the Wolf growls.

"Didn' say nothin', Mister."

"Hmmp!" He slides his rifle back into his saddle. "Anybody eve' tell you, you got big ears, kid?" he says pointedly to Abe. Abe doesn' answe'. Wolf takes stock o' his slaves, 'cause we know they's slaves, 'n reins his horse 'roun'. "Le's get goin', Rooste'. We got mo' 'mpo'tant things we gotta do th'n wastin' 'r breath with a big-eared nigra love' 'n his stupid friend.'

The negro what Rooste' hit with his switch takes a chance 'n glances back. He smiles the wisp of a smile 'n nods his head.

When they roun' the corne' 'n 'r back in the woods, Abe picks up a stone 'n throws it as far as he can in they d'rection. "Ain't right, Austin," he says 'n kicks up the dirt 'n the road. "I wouldn' treat m' dog like that. God didn' create no man t' be a slave, 'n I don' care what it says in the Bible. It ain't right."

That group o' slaves weren' the first we seen, 'n it sure wouldn' be the last. I surely 'member Abe tellin' me that day, "It ain't right." He truly became a man o' his word, o' course that neve' woulda happened without a little help from me.

Few weeks later, we got hit with a lot o' rain, 'n the storms 'n downpours kep' us home 'n off the road for nearly a week. Finally, the clouds moved east, 'n the sun come out t' dry the land 'n the crops. Crops don' like muddy fields.

Me 'n Abe think alike back then, though I know his brain gone much farther 'n mine since we is kids. Anyway, soon as that sun come up, I headed west 'n Abe headed east. We met up 'n sat down on an old log 'n used sticks t' clean the mud from our shoes. Though 'taint always the case, we is both wearin' shoes that day. The turnpike is as muddy as the fields. Sittin' there, we sudd'nly heard movement in the bushes 'n then the f'miliar gobble of 'n ol' Tom turkey. Abe raised his finger to his lips 'n whispered, "Shhhh." We got off that log and laid down on the wet ground 'n waited. We had it in 'r minds t' catch that turkey. How we's gonna split it up if we did catch it neve' 'ccurred t' us.

As we lay there in the cold mud, each o' us found two o' three good throwin' stones. You know the kind I'm talkin' 'bout. They flat 'n fit nicely between a boy's thumb 'n finger on his throwin' hand. We's very quiet, 'n that ol' Tom just be makin' his way in 'r d'rection, not 'spectin' t'all that two kids be liein' there in wait.

Turkey sure was takin' his time, though, 'n fin'ly Abe whispers, "I'm gonna jump up real quick, 'n you do the same. He ain't that far 'way, 'n I'm sure one o' us is gonna hit 'im. You ready?" No sooner did I nod my head, Abe leaps to his feet 'n throws his first rock. He's wide o' his mark, 'n I ain't much closer. 'Fore we could get off 'nother throw, that Tom is flyin' toward the creek fo' his life.

"Come on," Abe yells, 'n we take off down the hill.

Now the Knob ain't norm'lly much of a creek, but you got t' r'member that it been rainin' hard fo' nearly a week, 'n what was norm'lly a creek what you could run 'cross with no problems was now a mighty river. I look at it 'n think 'bout Moses standin' 'n front o' that Red Sea, but me 'n Abe ain't got no staff o' God t' work no mir'cles. 'Course that turkey jus' flap his way 'cross. We had shoes that day, but we didn' have wings!

Abe is gettin' mad 'cause that Tom done outsmart us. "We gonna get that Tom," he says 'n points 50 paces upstream where a big ol' tree is growin' bent ove' the creek. "We kin coon it o'er the creek on that tree." Made sense t' me. Wouldn' be the firs' time me 'n Abe eve' straddled a log t' get ove' the Knob, 'course not when it is runnin' as fast 'n mighty as it be runnin' now.

Abe's 'bout halfway 'cross 'n calls back, "I kin see that Tom, but you be careful, Austin. This log's mighty slipp'ry." No sooner those words out his mouth 'n I see Abe lose his grip. He rolls ove' the log 'n tries t' hang on with his legs, but that log's like a greased pig. Abe falls int' the muddy water that's roiled up like a boilin' pot o' water 'n he disappears!

"Sheee-it," I screams 'n slide back down the log 'n start racin' downstream lookin' fo' a sign o' my friend, but he ain't nowhere t' be seen. Nothin' but bubblin', rushin' muddy water carryin' sticks 'n other things what got in its way. I keep runnin', figurin' I gotta run faste' than the wate'.

'Bout the time my lungs is 'bout t' burst, I see his arm rise from the wate', then his head come up and he gets a breath o' air. He goes back unde'. I'm ahead o' him, 'n start runnin' again.

Next thing I know, they's a man, a black man standin' 100 paces downstream starin' at me. "Help me," I cry out. "My friend's in the creek. We needs help!" Abe's hand rises again 'n he manages to keep his head 'bove the water, still gaspin' fo' air.

The man see's 'im n' don' take long t' figur' out what's goin' on. He spies a birch branch what broke from its tree durin' the storms. Its long enough to reach to the middle of the rushin' water. I fall to his feet as he braces himself with his back up to a sturdy tree. Abe is upon us in two heartbeats 'n grabs that branch with his two strong hands. The man loses his footin' 'n falls to the ground, but he don' let go o' that branch, 'n I don' let go o' his feet. The branch is green 'n it ain't gonna break. We hold on with all 'r might, me to the man's naked feet, the man to the thick end o' the branch, 'n Abe to the skinny end. Ain't none o' us gonna let the othe' one go.

The current's strong, but seems like we is stronger, 'n Abe swings to the creek bank, grabs hold o' the trunk of the closest saplin' 'n releases the birch branch. The man does, too, but I ain't 'bout t' let go o' his feet 'til he's on his knees 'n ready t' stand up. But he don' waste no time 'n says, "Come on! Les' get yo' frien' outa that cold wate'"

I don' have t' do much 'cause the man's a lot stronger than I am. He takes Abe by the shoulders 'n drags him up to the road.

When we outa the trees 'n into the sunlight, I git my first good look at the man. Up til now, I knew he is big 'n I know he is black. In full sunlight, I recognize 'im. This here is the same man what Rooste' hit with that switch, 'n what Abe saved from another' strike.

Abe rises to his hands 'n knees 'n spits out a consid'erable amount of water. "Damn that turkey," he says 'n laughs. 'Scapin' death's a funny thing fo' Abe 'n fo' the turkey, too. He gobbles in the distance from the far side of the creek. Abe waves.

The large man helps Abe to his feet. "You 'right?" he asks.

"I am," Abe responds, "but I don't think I could say that if it weren't for you 'n my friend Austin." He stares at the black man's face. "Say, I remember you. You're one of them slaves what Wolf 'n Rooster was marchin' up the turnpike a few weeks past."

"I is, boss. I is the same man you done saved from the switch. Now, looks like I done saved you with a switch."

"Whatchoo doin' here?" I ask. "Don' appear t' be anyone else with you. You alone?"

"I is alone." He lowers his eyes. "I best be goin'."

"Where you goin'?"

"North. You boys know which way is North?"

"Easier t' tell from the night sky," Abe answers, "but if you keep the sun on your right shoulder when it rises and let it slide to your left as it sets, you be headin' North."

"Which one be my right shoulder, boss?"

Abe reaches up and puts his hand on the man's right shoulder. "This one. The one with the scar. The scar'll help you remember this is your right shoulder. Don't call me boss."

"Okay, boss. I 'spect sun be movin' that way, so I put it on my left shoulder. That right?" His left bicep bulges as he touches his shoulder.

Abe nods. The black man waves and disappears into the woods moving North. Hungry bloodhounds bark in the distance.

