**STORY: THEODORE PARKER AND THE CRAFTS**

By Polly Peterson.

This is the story of Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister who was determined to do whatever he could to end slavery in the United States. His powerful sermons were legendary. This is also the story of Millard Fillmore, whose actions earned him the contempt of Theodore Parker and abolitionists everywhere. He became the President of the United States in 1850.

But the story begins with two runaway slaves, a married couple from Macon, Georgia, who planned a daring escape from slavery. Ellen Craft had skin so light that she could easily pass for white. She decided to disguise herself as an ailing Southern gentleman traveling to Philadelphia for medical care. Her husband, William Craft, whose skin was dark, would pretend to be the "master's" doting slave. Together they would travel 1,000 miles to freedom in the North.

On December 21, 1848, they both obtained passes to travel to the next town for Christmas. But their real destination was the North. They bought train tickets to Savannah, Georgia. From there, in their disguises, they traveled by train and steamboat up the coasts of South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Washington, D.C., and Maryland. By Christmas Day, they had arrived in Philadelphia, a Northern city. After spending three weeks with a Quaker farmer and his family, the Crafts traveled to Boston, where they found a home. William worked as a cabinetmaker, and Ellen worked as a seamstress. They lived with Lewis Hayden, a free black, whose boarding house often served as a safe house for fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad. The Crafts became members of Theodore Parker's Unitarian congregation.

In September, 1850, the U.S. Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law. The law not only provided for the return of fugitive slaves to their masters in the South, but also required private citizens in the North to assist in their capture. Abolitionists in Boston immediately began organizing resistance to the law. Theodore Parker was one of the founders of a Vigilance Committee designed to protect "the colored inhabitants of Boston from any invasion of their rights." The Vigilance Committee included blacks as well as whites. Lewis Hayden and William Craft were members.

On October 20, 1850, two agents arrived in Boston, sent by the Crafts' former owners to catch the fugitives. The agents took for granted that Boston officials would assist them, but in this they were disappointed. Vigilance Committee members protected the Crafts and relentlessly harassed the two slave-catchers. The coordinated actions of the abolitionist community and African Americans throughout the city thwarted the agents at every turn. The slave-catchers stayed in Boston for more than a month, trying to waylay the Crafts, but in the end, they had to return to Georgia empty-handed. The Crafts went hurriedly overseas to England, where they would be safe.

Theodore Parker wrote an angry letter to President Fillmore, telling him the story of the Craft escape and challenging him to enforce his monstrous law. "Suppose I had taken the woman to my own house, and sheltered her there till the storm had passed by: should you think I did a thing worthy of fine and imprisonment?" he asked. He made it clear that he would obey the laws of God, even if it meant breaking the laws of men.

Strange to say, Millard Fillmore, the President who had signed the Fugitive Slave Law, was also a Unitarian who hated slavery. How could his beliefs concerning the law be so different from Parker's?

"God knows I detest slavery," he wrote to Daniel Webster, his Secretary of State, "but... we must endure it and give it such protection as is guaranteed by the Constitution till we can get rid of it without destroying the last hope of free government in the world."

President Fillmore had sworn to uphold the Constitution of the United States, and the Constitution allowed rights to slaveholders. He had promised to abide by the decisions of the Congress, and they had passed a Fugitive Slave Law. He threw the weight of his influence onto enforcing the Fugitive Slave Law because he believed it was the only way to keep the Union together, and he believed that safeguarding the Union was his sworn duty as President.

Those who supported the Fugitive Slave Law often stated that the purpose of government was to protect property. They argued that, since slaves were property, no one, including the slaves themselves, had any right to deprive the slaveholder of rightful ownership. A runaway slave was nothing more than a thief, in this view. They also fooled themselves into believing all sorts of falsehoods about the natural inferiority of black people. Many even convinced themselves that black people were happier in slavery than they would be if left to fend for themselves in the world.

Theodore Parker was incensed. How could the United States have strayed so far from the Revolutionary ideals of its founders? His own grandfather, Captain John Parker, had fought in Lexington, Massachusetts, in one of the very first skirmishes of the Revolutionary War. In those days, Americans had not been afraid to stand up for liberty, though it meant breaking the unjust laws imposed on them by their government in Britain. Now, this very country, founded on a principle of liberty and justice for all, was enforcing laws designed specifically to deny liberty and justice.

"There hangs in my study... the gun my grandfather fought with at the battle of Lexington... and also the musket he captured from a British soldier on that day," Parker wrote in his letter to President Fillmore. "If I would not peril my property, my liberty, nay my life to keep my parishioners out of slavery, then I should throw away these trophies, and should think I was the son of some coward and not a brave man's child."

Many other abolitionists were against using violence, but after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, Parker did not agree with them. He often used the proud history of the Revolution as a way of bringing people to his point of view. He also saw that over the years there had been a practice of erasing the memory of black participation in the Revolution, and he was dedicated to reminding his fellow Americans of the historic role blacks had played.

Conflict between the northern and southern states was reaching a boiling point. Theodore Parker believed that the North must stand up against a government dominated by the interests of the Southern slaveholders. He hadn't wanted to put the abolition of slavery into the center of his life and ministry, but he felt he had no choice. Millard Fillmore hadn't wanted to support the institution of slavery, but he also felt he had no choice. He did not want his country to divide in two.

In the end, Fillmore's signing of the Fugitive Slave Law probably did keep the country together for another ten years. And, in the end, that law probably strengthened the resolve of people in the North, making it possible for them to win the Civil War. Up to that point, it was easy for Northerners to see slavery as none of their business. Whether they hated slavery or not, few Northerners considered themselves personally responsible until they were forced to participate in the capture of fugitives and to witness the kidnapping of innocent free blacks by slave-catchers.

Until the time of the Fugitive Slave Law, abolitionists had been very unpopular, even in Massachusetts. Now, Theodore Parker, who had been despised by many for his radical views, suddenly became enormously popular. Every week, his sermons and speeches were heard by thousands of people and read by many more. One person who read everything by Theodore Parker that he could get his hands on was William Herndon of Illinois, Abraham Lincoln's law partner. Herndon often passed along Parker's writings to Lincoln, who expressed his admiration. In one sermon, Herndon had underlined the following words that he thought would interest Lincoln: "Democracy is direct self-government, over all the people, for all the people, by all the people."

Ten years later, Abraham Lincoln became the President of the United States, and the Civil War began. By then, Theodore Parker had died. He did not live to see the abolition of slavery in the United States. Yet, he had helped to lay the groundwork by convincing many people that they must not blindly follow unjust laws. His words had the power to persuade many people to join the fight to end slavery.