A Man for the Ages

A Story of the Builders of Democracy

By Irving Bacheller

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CHAPTER XVI—Continued.

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"He has not yet accomplished much in the legislature. I don't think that he will until some big issue comes along. 'I'm not much of a hand at hunting squirrels,' he said to me the other day. 'Wait till I see a bear.' The people of Vandalia and Springfield have never seen him yet. They don't know him as I do. But they all respect him—just for his good-fellowship, honesty and decency. I guess that every fellow with a foul mouth hates himself for it and envies the man who isn't like him. They begin to see his skill as a politician, which has shown itself in the passage of a bill removing the capital to Springfield. Abe Lincoln was the man who put it through. But he has not yet uncovered his best talents. Mark my word, some day Lincoln will be a big man.

"The death of his sweetheart has aged and sobered him. When we are together he often sits looking down with a sad face. For a while not a word out of him. Suddenly he will begin saying things, the effect of which will go with me to my grave, although I cannot call back the words and place them as he did. He is what I would call a great captain of words. Seems as if I heard the band playing while they marched by me as well dressed and stepping as proud and regular as the Boston Guards. In some great battle between Right and Wrong you will hear from him. I hope it may be the battle between Slavery and Freedom, although at present he thinks they must avoid coming to a clinch. In my opinion it cannot be done. I expect to live to see the fight and to take part in it."

Late in the session of 1836-1837 the prophetic truth of these words began to reveal itself. A bill was being put through the legislature denouncing the growth of abolition sentiment and its activity in organized societies and upholding the right of property in slaves.

Suddenly Lincoln had come to a fork in the road. Popularity, the urge of many friends, the counsel of wealth and power, and public opinion, the call of good politics pointed in one direction and the crowd went that way. It was a stampede. Lincoln stood alone at the corner. The crowd beckoned, but in vain. One man came back and joined him. It was Dan Stone, who was not a candidate for re-election. His political career was ended. There were three words on the sign-board pointing toward the perilous and lonely road that Lincoln proposed to follow. They were the words Justice and Human Rights. Lincoln and Dan Stone took that road in a protest, declaring that they "believed the institution of slavery was founded upon injustice and bad policy." Lincoln had followed his conscience, instead of the crowd.

At twenty-eight years of age he had safely passed the great danger point in his career. The declaration at Decatur, the speeches against Douglas, the miracle of turning 4,000,000 beasts into 4,000,000 men, the sublime utterance at Gettysburg, the wise parables, the second inaugural, the innumerable acts of mercy, all of which lifted him into undying fame, were now possible. Henceforth he was to go forward with the growing approval of his own spirit and the favor of God.

BOOK THREE

CHAPTER XVII.

Wherein Young Mr. Lincoln Betrays Ignorance of Two Highly Important Subjects.

There were two subjects of which Mr. Lincoln had little understanding. They were women and finance. Until they had rightly appraised the value of his friendship, women had been wont to regard him with a giant curiosity. He had been aware of this, and for years had avoided women, save those of old acquaintance. When he lived at the tavern in the village, often he had gone without a meal rather than expose himself to the eyes of strange women. The reason for this was well understood by those who knew him. The young man was an exceedingly sensitive human being. No doubt he had suffered more than any one knew from ill-concealed ridicule, but he had been able to bear it with composure in his callow youth. Later nothing roused his anger like an attempt to ridicule him.

Two women he had regarded with great tenderness—his foster mother, the second wife of Thomas Lincoln, and Ann Rutledge. Others had been to him, mostly, delightful but inscrutable beings. The company of women and of dollars had been equally unfamiliar to him. He had said more than once in his young manhood that he felt embarrassed in the presence of either, and knew not quite how to behave himself—an exaggeration in which there was no small amount of truth.

In 1836 the middle frontier had entered upon a singular phase of its development. Emigrants from the East and South and from overseas had been pouring into it. The summer before the lake and river steamers had been crowded with them, and their wagons had come in long processions out of the East. Chicago had begun its phenomenal growth. A frenzied speculation in town lots had been under way in that community since the autumn of '35. It was spreading through the state. Imaginary cities were laid out on the lonely prairies and all the corner lots sold to eager buyers and paid for with promises. Millions of conversational, promissory dollars, based upon the gold at the foot of the rainbow, were changing hands day by day. The legislature, with an empty treasury behind it, voted twelve millions for river improvements and imaginary railroads and canals, for which neither surveys nor estimates had been made, to serve the dream-built cities of the speculator. If Mr. Lincoln had had more experience in the getting and use of dollars and more acquaintance with the shrinking timidity of large sums, he would have tried to dissipate these illusions of grandeur. But he went with the crowd, every member of which had a like inexperience.

In the midst of the session Samson Traylor arrived in Vandalia on his visit to Mr. Lincoln.

"I have sold my farm," said Samson to his old friend the evening of his arrival.

"Did you get a good price?" Mr. Lincoln asked.

"All that my conscience would allow me to take," said Samson. "The man offered me three dollars an acre in cash and ten dollars in notes. We compromised on seven dollars, all cash."

"What are you going to do now that you have sold out?"

"I was thinking of going up to Tazewell county."

"Why don't you go to the growing and prosperous town of Springfield?" Mr. Lincoln asked. "The capitol will be there, and so will I. It is going to be a big city. Men who are to make history will live in Springfield. You must come and help. I shall need your friendship, your wisdom and your sympathy. I shall want to sit often by your fireside. You'll find a good school there for the children. If you'll think of it seriously I'll try to get you into the public service."

"We need you plenty," Samson answered. "We kind o' think o' you as one o' the family. I'll talk it over with Sarah and see. Never mind the job. If I keep you behavin' yourself, it'll be job enough. Anyway, I guess we can manage to get along."

"I've had a talk with Stuart and have some good news for Harry and Bim," said young Mr. Lincoln. "Stuart thinks she can get a divorce under the law of 1827. I suppose they are still interested in each other?"

"He's like most of the Yankees. Once he gets set, it's hard to change him. The Kelsos have moved to Chicago, and I don't know how Bim stands. If Harry knows, he hasn't said a word to us about it."

"I'm interested in that little romance," said the legislator. "It's our duty to do what we can to secure the happiness of these young lovers. Tell Harry to come over here. I want to talk with him."

CHAPTER XVIII.

In Which Mr. Lincoln, Samson and Harry Take a Long Ride Together and the Latter Visit the Flourishing Little City of Chicago.

Mr. Lincoln had brought the papers which Harry was to take to Bim, and made haste to deliver them. The boy was eager to be off on his mission. The fields were sown. The new buyer was coming to take possession in two weeks. Samson and Harry had finished their work in New Salem.

"Wait till tomorrow and maybe I'll go with ye," said Samson. "I'm anxious to take a look at that little mushroom city of Chicago."

"And buy a few corner lots?" Abe asked, with a smile.

"No; I'll wait till next year. They'll be cheaper then. I believe in Chicago. It's placed right—on the waterway to the north and east, with good country on three sides and transportation on the other. It can go into partnership with Steam Power right away and begin to do business. Your grain and pork can go straight from there to Albany and New York and Boston and Baltimore without being rehandled. When railroads come—if they ever do—Steam Power will be shoving grain and meat and passengers into Chicago from every point of the compass."

Abe Lincoln turned to Sarah and said: "This is a growing country. You ought to see the cities springing up there in the legislature. I was looking with great satisfaction at the crop when Samson came along one day and fell on it. He was like a frost in midsummer."

"The seed was sown too early," Samson rejoined. "You and I may live to see all the dreams of Vandalia come true."

"And all the nightmares, too," said the young statesman.

"Yes, we're going to wake up and find a cold morning and not much to eat in the house and the wolf at the door, but we'll live through it."

Then the young statesman proposed: "If you are going with Harry, I'll go along and see what they've done on the Illinois and Michigan canal. Some contractors who worked on the Erie canal will start from Chicago Monday to look the ground over and bid on the construction of the southern end of it. I want to talk with them when they come along down the line."

"I guess a few days in the saddle would do you good," said Samson.

"I reckon it would. I've been cloyed on house air and oratory and future greatness. The prairie wind and your pessimism will straighten me up."

Harry rode to the village that afternoon to get "Colonel" and Mrs. Lukins to come out to the farm and stay with Sarah while he and Samson were away.

Josiah, now a sturdy boy of thirteen, stood in the dooryard, holding the two saddle ponies from Nebraska which Samson had bought of a drover. Betsey, a handsome young miss almost fifteen years old, stood beside him. Sarah, whose face had begun to show the wear of years full of loneliness and hard work, was packing the saddle-bags, now nearly filled, with extra socks and shirts and doughnuts and bread and butter.

They met Abe Lincoln at the tavern, where he was waiting on a big horse which he had borrowed for the trip from James Rutledge. Without delay, the three men set out on the north road in perfect weather. From the hill's edge they could look over a wooded plain running far to the east.

As they rode on, the young statesman repeated a long passage from one of the sermons of Dr. William Ellery Channing on the "Instability of Human Affairs."

"I wish that I had your memory," Samson remarked.

"My memory is like a piece of metal," said the young legislator. "Learning is not easy for me. It's rather slow work—like engraving with a tool. But when a thing is once printed on my memory it seems to stay there. It doesn't rub out. When I run across a great idea, well expressed, I like to put it on the wall of my mind where I can live with it. In this way every man can have his own little art gallery and be in the company of great men."

They forded a creek in deep water, where a bridge had been washed away.

As they came out dripping on the farther shore, Lincoln remarked: "The thing to do in fording a deep stream is to keep watch o' your horse's ears. As long as you can see 'em you're all right."

"Mr. Lincoln, I'm sorry—you got into a hole," said Samson.

"I don't mind that, but while we're traveling together, please don't call me 'Mr. Lincoln.' I don't think I've done anything to deserve such lack of respect."

Samson answered: "If you're nice to us, I don't know but we'll call ye 'Abe' again, just for a few days. You can't expect us to go too far with a man who associates with judges and generals and governors and such trash. If you keep it up, you're bound to lose standing in our community."

"I know I've changed," said Abe. "I've grown older since Ann died—years ago—but I don't want you fellows to throw me over. I'm on the same level that you are and I intend to stay there. It's a fool notion that men go up some heavenly stairway to another plane when they begin to do things worth while. That's a kind of feudalistic twaddle. The wise man keeps his feet on the ground and lifts his mind as high as possible. The higher he lifts it, the more respect he will have for the common folk. Have either of you seen McNamar since he got back?"

"I saw him the day he drove into the village," Harry answered. "He was expecting to find Ann and make good his promise to marry her."

"Poor fool! It's a sad story all around," said Abe Lincoln. "He's not a bad fellow, I reckon, but he broke Ann's heart. Didn't realize what a tender thing it was. I can't forgive him."

In the middle of the afternoon they came in sight of the home of Henry Brimstead.

"Here's where we stop and feed, and listen to Henry's secrets," said Samson.

The level fields were cut into squares outlined by wooden stakes.

Brimstead was mowing the grass in his dooryard. He dropped his scythe and came to welcome the travelers.

"Say, don't you know that you are standing in the center of a large and promising city?" he said to Samson. "You are standing at the corner of Grand avenue and Empire street, in the growing city of El Dorado, near the great water highway of Illinois," Brimstead declaimed.

"Where's the growin'?" Samson demanded.

Brimstead came closer and said in a confidential tone: "If you stand right where you are an' listen, you'll hear it growin'."

"It sounds a good deal like a turnip growin' in a garden," Samson remarked, thoughtfully.

"Give it a fair chance," Brimstead went on. "Two cellars have been dug over there in the pasture. One is for the town hall and the other for the university which the Methodists are going to build. A railroad has been surveyed and is expected this summer. Every corner lot has been sold and paid for, half cash and half notes."

"The brokers in Chicago got the cash and you got the notes?"

"You've said it. I've got a drawer full of notes."

"And you've quit farmin'?"

"Say, I'll tell ye the land has gone up so it wouldn't pay. Peasley an' I cal'ate that we're goin' to git rich this summer sellin' lots."

"Wake up, man. You're dreamin'," said Samson.

Henry came close to Samson and said in a confidential tone: "Say, mebbe the whole state is dreamin' an' yellin' in its sleep 'bout canals an schools an' factories an' mills an' railroads. We're havin' a good time, anyway."

This reminded Abe Lincoln of the story:

"There was a man in Pope county who came home one evening and sat down in the middle of the barn floor and began to sing. His wife asked him:

"'Are you drunk or crazy or a fool?'"

"'I don't know what you'd call it, but I know I ain't got a darn bit to spare,' he answered, with a whoop of joy."

"You're all goin' to roll out o' bed and hit the floor with a bump," said Samson.

Brimstead declared in his usual tone of confidence:

"The worst part o' bein' a fool is lonesomeness. I was the only one in Flea valley. Now I shall be in the company of a governor an' dozens o' well known statesmen. You'll be the only lonesome man in Illinois."

"I sometimes fear that he will enjoy the loneliness of wisdom," said Honest Abe.

"In some parts of the state every farmer owns his own private city," Samson declared. "I hope Henry Brimstead does as well raising cities as he did raising grain. He was a very successful farmer."

"I knew you'd make fun o' me but when you come again you'll see the towers an' steeples," said Brimstead. "Put up your horses and come into the house and see the first lady of El Dorado."

Mrs. Brimstead had their dinner cooking before the horses were cared for. "Well, what do you think of Henry's plans?" she asked.

"I like the farm better."

"So do I," the woman declared. "But the men around here have gone crazy with dreams of sudden wealth."

"I've only a word of advice about it. If those Chicago men sell any more of your land make them take the notes and you take the money. Where is Annabel?"

"Teaching the school at Hopedale."

"We're going up to Chicago to see the Kelsos," said Samson.

"Glad you are. Some rich feller up there by the name of Davis has fallen in love with Bim an' he don't give her any peace. He left here last night goin' north. Owns a lot o' land in Tazewell county an' wears a diamond in his shirt as big as your thumb nail. Bim has been teaching school in Chicago this winter. It must be a wonderful place. Every one has loads of money. The stores an' houses are as thick as the hair on a dog's back—some of 'em as big as all outdoors."

Abe Lincoln and Harry entered with their host and the travelers sat down to a luncheon of pudding and milk and doughnuts and pie.

"How far do you call it to the sycamore woods?" Lincoln asked as they rose from the table.

"About thirty mile," said Brimstead.

"We must be off if we are to get there before dark," the young statesman declared.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Ass Frequently Mentioned in Bible.

The most famous dialogue in all history is that recorded in the sixteenth chapter of Numbers, between the ass and Balaam. As will be remembered, the ass had much the better of the argument. All through the Bible one finds frequent mention of the ass which at the present time in Palestine, and the Near East generally, still plays, as anciently it did, an important part in the life of the people, who take much pains in breeding the animal and rearing the young.

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