A Man for the Ages

A Story of the Builders of Democracy

By Irving Bacheller

CHAPTER XI.

In Which Abe, Elected to the Legislature, Gives What Comfort He Can to Ann Rutledge in the Beginning of Her Sorrows—Also He Goes to Springfield for New Clothes.

Radford's grocery had been so wrecked by the raiders that its owner was disheartened. Reinforced by John Cameron and James Rutledge he had succeeded in drawing them away before they could steal whisky enough to get drunk. But they had thrown much of his goods into the street. Radford mended his windows and offered his stock for sale. After a time Berry and Lincoln bought it, giving notes in payment and applied for a license to sell the liquors they had thus acquired.

Late that autumn a boy baby arrived in the Traylor home. Mrs. Onstott, Mrs. Waddell and Mrs. Kelso came to help and one or the other of them did the nursing and cooking while Sarah was in bed and for a little time thereafter. The coming of the baby was a comfort to this lonely mother of the prairies.

There is a letter from Sarah to her brother dated May, 10, 1833, in which she sums up some months of history in the words that follow:

"The Lord has given us a new son. I have lived through the ordeal—thanks to His goodness—and am strong again. The coming of the baby has reconciled us to the loss of our old friends as much as anything could. It has made this little home dear to us and proved the quality of our new friends. Nothing is too much for them to do. I don't wonder that Abe Lincoln has so much confidence in the people of this country. They are sound at heart, both the northerners and the southerners. Harry Needles is getting over his disappointment. He goes down to the store often to sit with Abe and Jack Kelso and hear them talk. He and Samson are getting deeply interested in politics. Abe lets Harry read the books that he borrows from Major Stuart of Springfield. The boy is bent on being a lawyer and improving his mind. Bim Kelso writes to her mother that she is very happy in her new home but there is something between the lines which seems to indicate that she is trying to put a good face on a bad matter. Abe has been appointed postmaster. Every time he leaves the store he takes the letters in his hat and delivers them as he gets a chance. We have named the new baby Samuel."

One evening, of that summer, Abe came out to the Traylors' with a letter in his hat for Sarah.

"How's business?" Samson asked.

"Going to peter out, I reckon," Abe answered with a sorrowful look. "It will leave me badly in debt. I wanted something that would give me a chance for study and I got it. By jing! It looks as if I was going to have years of study trying to get over it. Have you got any work to give me? You know I can split rails about as fast as the next man and I'll take my pay in wheat or corn."

"You may give me all the time you can spend outside the store," said Samson.

That evening they had a talk about the whisky business and its relation to the character of Eliphalet Biggs and to sundry infractions of law and order in their community. Samson had declared that it was wrong to sell liquor.

"All that kind of thing can be safely left to the common sense of our people," said Abe. "The remedy is education, not revolution. Slowly the people will have to set down all the items in the ledger of common sense that passes from sire to son. By and by some generation will strike a balance. That may not come in a hundred years. Soon or late the majority of the people will reach a reckoning with John Barleycorn. If there's too much against him they will act. You might as well try to stop a glacier by building a dam in front of it. They have opened an account with slavery, too. By and by they'll decide its fate."

Such was his faith in the common folk of America whose way of learning and whose love of the right he knew as no man has known it.

In this connection the New Englander wrote in his diary:

"He has spent his boyhood in the South and his young manhood in the North. He has studied the East and lived in the West. He is the people—I sometimes think—and about as slow to make up his mind. As Isaiah says: 'He does not judge after the sight of his eyes neither reprove after the hearing of his ears.' Abe has to think about it."

In April Abe wrote another address to the voters announcing that he was again a candidate for a seat in the legislature. Late that month Harry walked with him to Pappsville where a crowd had assembled to attend a public sale. At one place there were men in the crowd who knew Harry's record in the war. They called on him for a speech. He spoke on the need of the means of transportation in Sangamon county with such insight and dignity and convincing candor that both Abe and the audience hailed him as a coming man. Abe and he were often seen together those days.

In New Salem they were called the disappointed lovers. It was known there that Abe was very fond of Ann Rutledge, although he had not, as yet, openly confessed to any one—not even to Ann—there being no show of hope for him. Ann was deeply in love with John McNeil—the genial, handsome and successful young Irishman. The affair had reached the stage of frankness, of an open discussion of plans, of fond affection expressing itself in caresses quite indifferent to ridicule.

For Ann it had been like warm sunlight on the growing rose. She was neater in dress, lovelier in form and color, more graceful in movement and sweeter-voiced than ever she had been. It is the old way that Nature has of preparing the young to come out upon the stage of real life and to act in its moving scenes. Abe manfully gave them his best wishes and when he spoke of Ann it was done very tenderly. The look of sadness, which all had noted in his moments of abstraction, deepened and often covered his face with its veil. That is another way that Nature has of preparing the young. For these the roses have fallen and only the thorns remain. They are not lured; they seem to be driven to their tasks, but for all, soon or late, her method changes.

On a beautiful morning of June, 1834, John McNeil left the village. Abe Lincoln and Harry and Samson and Sarah and Jack Kelso and his wife stood with the Rutledges in the dooryard of the tavern when he rode away. He was going back to his home in the East to return in the autumn and make Ann his bride. The girl wept as if her heart would break when he turned far down the road and waved his hand to her.

"Oh, my pretty lass! Do you not hear the birds singing in the meadows?" said Jack Kelso. "Think of the happiness all around you and of the greater happiness that is coming when he returns. Sname on you!"

"I'm afraid he'll never come back," Ann sobbed.

"Nonsense! Don't get a maggot in your brain and let the crows go walking over your face. Come, we'll take a ride in the meadows and if I don't bring you back laughing you may call me no prophet."

So the event passed.

Harry traveled about with Abe a good deal that summer, "electioneering," as they called it, from farm to farm. Abe used to go into the fields, with the men whose favor he sought, and bend his long back over a scythe or a cradle and race them playfully across the field of grain cutting a wider swath than any other and always holding the lead. Every man was out of breath at the end of his swath and needed a few minutes for recuperation. That gave Abe a chance for his statement of the county's needs and his plan of satisfying them. He had met and talked with a majority of the voters before the campaign ended in his election in August.

At odd times that summer he had been surveying a new road with Harry Needles for his helper. In September they resumed their work upon it in the vicinity of New Salem and Abe began to carry the letters in his hat again. Every day Ann was looking for him as he came by in the dim light of the early morning on his way to work.

"Anything for me?" she would ask.

"No mail in since I saw you, Ann," was the usual answer.

Often he would say: "I'm afraid not, but here—you take these letters and look through 'em and make sure."

Ann would take them in her hands, trembling with eagerness, and run indoors to the candlelight, and look them over. Always she came back with the little bundle of letters very slowly as if her disappointment were a heavy burden.

"There'll be one next mail if I have to write it myself," Abe said one morning in October as he went on.

To Harry Needles, who was with him that morning, he said:

"I wonder why that fellow don't write to Ann. I couldn't believe that he has been fooling her, but now I don't know what to think of him. I wonder what has happened to the fellow."

The mail stage was late that evening. As it had not come at nine Mr. Hill went home and left Abe in the store to wait for his mail. The stage arrived a few minutes later. Abe examined the little bundle of letters and newspapers which the driver had left with him. Then he took a paper and sat down to read in the firelight. While he was thus engaged the door opened softly and Ann Rutledge entered. The postmaster was not aware of her presence until she touched his arm.

"Please give me a letter," she said.

"Sit down, Ann," said he, very gently, as he placed a chair in the fireglow.

She took it, turning toward him with a look of fear and hope. Then he added:

"I'm sorry, but the truth is it didn't come. It is terrible, Ann, that I have to help in this breaking of your heart that is going on. I seem to be the head of the hammer that hits you so hard, but the handle is in other hands. Honestly, Ann, I wish I could do the suffering for you—every bit of it—and give your poor heart a rest. Hasn't he written you this summer?"

"Not since July tenth," she answered. Then she confided to Abe that her lover told her before he went away that his name was not McNeil but McNamar; that he had changed his name to keep clear of his family until he had made a success; that he had gone East to get his father and mother and bring them back with him; lastly she came to the thing that worried her most—the suspicion of her father and mother that John was not honest. "They say that he probably had a wife when he came here—that that is why he don't write to me."

Then after a little silence she pleaded: "You don't think that, do you, Abe?"

"No," said the latter, giving her the advantage of every doubt. "John did a foolish thing, but we must not condemn him without a knowledge of the facts. The young often do foolish things and sickness would account for his silence. You go home and go to sleep and stop worrying, Ann. You'll get that letter one of these days."

A day or two later Abe and Harry went to Springfield. Their reason for the trip lay in a talk between the postmaster and Jack Kelso the night before as they sat by the latter's fireside.

"I've been living where there was no one to find fault with my parts of speech or with the parts of my legs which were not decently covered," said Abe. "The sock district of my person has been without representation in the legislature of my intellect up to its last session. Then we got a bill through for local improvements and the governor has approved the appropriation. Suddenly we discovered that there was no money in the treasury. But Samson Traylor has offered to buy an issue of bonds of the amount of fifteen dollars."

"I'm glad to hear you declare in favor of external improvements," said Kelso. "We've all been too much absorbed by internal improvements. You're on the right trail, Abe. You've been thinking of the public ear and too little of the public eye. We must show some respect for both."

"Sometimes I think that comely dress ought to go with comely diction," said Abe. "But that's a thing you can't learn in books. There's no grammarian of the language of dress. Then I'm so big and awkward. It's a rather hopeless problem."

"You're in good company," Kelso assured him. "Nature guards her best men with some sort of singularity, not attractive to others. Often she makes them odious with conceit or deformity or dumbness or garrulity. Dante was such a poor talker that no one would ever ask him to dinner. If it had not been so I presume his muse would have been sadly crippled by indigestion. If you had been a good dancer and a lady's favorite, I wonder if you would have studied Kirkham and Burns and Shakespeare and Blackstone and Starkie, and the science of surveying and been elected to the legislature. I wonder if you could even have whipped Jack Armstrong."

"Or have enjoyed the friendship of Bill Berry and acquired a national debt, or have saved my imperiled country in the war with Black Hawk," Abe laughed.

In the matter of dress the postmaster had great confidence in the taste and knowledge of his young friend, Harry Needles, whose neat appearance Abe regarded with serious admiration. So he asked Harry to go with him on his new mission and help to choose the goods and direct the tailoring, for it seemed to him a highly important enterprise.

"Our appropriation is only fifteen dollars," said Abe as they came in sight of "the big village" on a warm bright day late in October. "Of course, I can't expect to make myself look like the President of the United States with such a sum, but I want to look like a respectable citizen of the United States, if that is possible. I'll give the old Abe and fifteen dollars to boot for a new one and we'll see what comes of it."

Springfield had been rapidly changing. It was still small and crude, but some of the best standards of civilization had been set up in that community. Families of wealth and culture in the East had sent their sons and a share of their capital to this little metropolis of the land of plenty to go into business. Handsome, well-groomed horses, in silver-mounted harness, drawing carriages that shone "so you could see your face in them," to quote from Abe again, were on its streets.

The two New Salem men stopped and studied a big sign in front of a large store on which this announcement had been lettered:

"Cloths, cassinettes, cassimeres, velvet silks, satins, Marseilles waistcoating, fine, calf boots, seal and morocco pumps for gentlemen, crepe lisse, lace veils. Thibet shawls, fine prunella shoes."

"Reads like a foreign language to me," said Abe. "How would you like a little Marseilles waistcoating?"

Suddenly a man touched his shoulder with a hearty "Howdy, Abe?"

It was Eli, "the Wandering Jew," as he had been wont to call himself in the days when he carried a pack on the road through Peter's Bluff and Clary's Grove and New Salem to Beardstown and back.

"Dis is my store," said Eli.

"Your store!" Abe exclaimed.

"Ya, look at de sign."

The Jew pointed to his sign-board, some fifty feet long under the cornice, on which they read the legend:

"Eli Fredenberg's Emporium."

Abe looked him over from head to foot and exclaimed:

"My conscience! You look as if you had been fixed up to be sold to the highest bidder."

The hairy, dusty, bow-legged, threadbare peddler had been touched by some miraculous hand. The lavish hand of the West had showered her favors on him. They resembled in some degree the barbaric pearl and gold of the East. He glowed with prosperity. Diamonds and ruffled linen and Scotch plaid and red silk on his neck and a blue band on his hat and a smooth-shorn face and perfumery were the glittering details that surrounded the person of Eli.

"Come in," urged the genial proprietor of the Emporium. "I vould like to show you my goots and introduce you to my brudder."

In the men's department after much thoughtful discussion they decided upon a suit of blue jeans—that being the only goods which, in view of the amount of cloth required, came within the appropriation. Eli advised against it.

"You are like Eli already," he said. "You haf got de pack off your back. Look at me. Don't you hear my clothes say somet'ing?"

"They are very eloquent," said Abe.

"Vell, dey make a speech. Dey say 'Eli Fredenberg he is no more a poor devil. You cannot sneeze at him once again. Nefer. He has climb de ladder up.' Now you let me sell you somet'ing vat makes a good speech for you."

"If you let me dictate the speech I'll agree," said Abe.

"Vell—vat is it?" Eli asked.

"I would like my clothes to say in a low tone of voice: 'This is humble Abraham Lincoln, about the same length and breadth that I am. He don't want to scare or astonish anybody. He don't want to look like a beggar or a millionaire. Just put him down for a hard-working man of good intentions who is badly in debt.'"

That ended all argument. The suit of blue jeans was ordered and the measures taken. As they were about to go Eli said:

"I forgot to tell you dot I haf seen Bim Kelso de odder day in St. Louis. I haf seen her on de street. She has been like a queen so grand!' De hat and gown from Paris and she valk so proud! But she look not so happy like she usit to be. I speak to her. Oh my, she vas glad and so surprised! She tolt me dot she vould like to come for a visit but her husband he does not vant her to go dere—nefer again. My jobber haf tolt me dot Mr. Biggs is git drunk efery day. Bim she t'ink de place no good."

"Poor child!" said Abe. "I'm afraid she's in trouble. Her parents have begun to suspect that something is wrong. They have never been invited to go down there and visit the girl. I reckon we'd better say nothing to any one of what we have heard, at present."

They reached New Salem in the middle of the night and went into Rutledge's barn and lay down on the haymow between two buffalo hides until morning.

NOW read the next installment which will appear in next week's issue of THE INDEPENDENT.

HOME BOY IN PULPIT OF FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

At the Sunday services, morning and evening, at the First Baptist church the pulpit was filled by Rev. W. T. Halstead. Mr. Halstead is a Pasquotank County boy who graduated several years ago from the Baptist Theological Seminary at Louisville, Ky., and was soon afterward called to the pastorate of the First Baptist church of Summerville, S. C., where he is still located. Together with his wife and family, he left Monday morning for his home, spending his vacation with his father, W. A. Halstead on West Cypress street, and with other relatives and friends in this section.