

30 A Play at Ford's Theatre



"When Grant gets possession of a place," said Lincoln, "he holds on to it as if he had inherited it."

Abraham Lincoln was in a good mood. The vacation on the *River Queen*, and the exciting events of the past week, had given him back his energy and optimism. It was April 14, 1865—and he was meeting with his cabinet. General Grant, now a great war hero, was a guest at the meeting. The two men enjoyed being together, and, since the war was just about over, they could joke a bit and relax.

The president told Grant and the cabinet members of a dream he had the previous night.

He was on a boat heading for a distant, misty shore. It was not such an unusual dream, but what was unusual was that he had had that same dream before. Each time he dreamed of the boat and the misty shore he learned big war news. So now he was sure the nation would hear something important before the day was over. Perhaps, he said, General Sherman had captured the last remaining Confederate army.

The cabinet members were in a good mood, too. They laughed about the dream and went on to serious matters. It was Reconstruction they talked about. How would the South be brought back into the Union? That was the important problem facing the nation. What should be done to help the newly freed men and women become useful citizens? They needed schooling, they needed land to farm, they needed jobs. How were the defeated white Southern leaders to be treated? After four years of terrible war many Northerners were in no mood to forgive them.



Reconstruction

was the name Lincoln used for the process of bringing North and South together into a united nation. What should be done with the officers of the Confederacy? Were they traitors? Traitors were usually hanged. What about the newly freed men and women? There was much to be decided.

In *Moving Day for the Confederacy*, the cabinet flees, its treasury and arms chests empty.

Rock of Ages

On February 1, 1865, President Lincoln signed a congressional resolution (adopted by both houses of Congress) that proposed a 13th amendment outlawing slavery. That same day, Dr. John Swett Rock (who was both a lawyer and a physician) was admitted to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court. Moments after that, Dr. Rock was "received upon the floor of the House of Representatives while it was in session," the first black person to be so honored.

The Congress, and most observers, were aware of the momentousness of the event. This was the Supreme Court that just a few years earlier (when led by Chief Justice Roger B. Taney) had declared that Dred Scott—and all blacks—had no rights as American citizens. But Salmon P. Chase was now chief justice. Rock described him as "a great and good man" and said, "with him I think my color will not be a bar to my admission [to the Supreme Court]." Senator Charles Sumner said, "the admission of a colored lawyer to the bar of the Supreme Court would make it difficult for any restriction on account of race to be maintained anywhere." The court was repudiating Taney's decision when it honored Dr. Rock. Everyone understood that. (*Repudiating* means "rejecting or casting off a previous decision.")

But, when he left the capital to return to Boston, John Rock was just another black to the train-ticket taker—and he didn't have a pass to leave the city. (Blacks needed identification passes; whites did not.) He had to get a pass before he could go home. Senator Sumner wrote that Rock's admission to the court "helped the way for admission of his race to the rights of citizenship, and especially the right to vote." But many other "great and good" people would be needed to carry on the fight for genuine equality of rights.

Some wanted the Southern leaders hanged. There was much talk but no decisions. Lincoln listened. He would announce his plans soon, he said.

The war had changed the president. He was not the same man he had been four years earlier. Everyone could see that. Lincoln had suffered terribly: his son had died, he had seen a generation of young Americans die. He had a spiritual quality now—some people called it a kind of saintliness. Whatever it was, he seemed to have found peace within himself.

He had always believed that blacks should be treated like whites. It was the only fair thing. And he was a fair-minded man. Before the war he had had suspicions that the races were different. That maybe blacks did not have the same needs, desires, and abilities as whites. That was before he got to know some black leaders. Before he listened to black soldiers. Before a black woman became his wife's friend, and his. Now he knew differently. He planned to use that knowledge to make the country wiser, and better.

He knew that while the cabinet was meeting, an American flag was being raised at Fort Sumter in the harbor at Charleston, South Carolina. The flag was the very one that had been lowered exactly five Aprils earlier. It was bullet-torn. Shots fired at that flag at Fort Sumter had begun the war. Now there would be cheers for the flag and there would be words of peace spoken. The nation's best-known abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, was in Charleston. So was the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, who was Harriet Beecher Stowe's brother and the country's most famous preacher. Northerners were going south again—and not as soldiers. Some had already opened schools for the newly freed men, women, and children. Doctors and nurses were helping the sick and wounded.

In Washington, at the cabinet session, someone handed General Grant a note. It was from his wife. The note said they were to go to Philadelphia to be with their sons. President Lincoln was disappointed. He had looked forward to spending the evening with the general. The Grants had been invited, along with the Lincolns, to a play at Ford's Theatre, the popular Washington

WAR, TERRIBLE WAR

playhouse located between the White House and the Capitol. Lincoln enjoyed going to the theater, although this was said to be a silly play. When he heard Grant was not going, the president told an aide he didn't want to go either. But he knew Mrs. Lincoln was looking forward to an evening out, and he didn't want to disappoint her.

So they went, with some other guests, and sat in the flag-covered president's box. The box was a small, separate balcony that hung over the stage. It was a good place to see the play, and, even though the audience couldn't quite see Lincoln behind the curtains and flags, they saw him enter and they stood while the orchestra played "Hail to the Chief." The play was funny, and Abraham Lincoln enjoyed laughing, so he must have relaxed in the comfortable chair the managers had put in the box especially for him.

Then something happened. It was as if the play shifted to the president's box. No one could believe what they saw and heard. Perhaps it was all part of the act. That was what some of the people in the audience thought. There was a sound like a small thunder boom, and some smoke. Then a wild-acting man climbed up out of the president's box, leaped onto the stage, said

What the assassin is believed to have said is *Sic semper tyrannis*—"thus ever to tyrants"—which means "This is the way tyrants are treated." It is Virginia's state motto.



FORD'S THEATRE

THEY STAY, AND A...
 Friday Evening, April 14th, 1865
 PRESIDENT LINCOLN'S
BENEFIT!
 LAST NIGHT
 OF MRS.
LAURA KEENE
 MR. JOHN DYOTT
 MR. HARRY HAWK



Top, Ford's Theatre; above, John Wilkes Booth; left, a poster advertising Lincoln's presence at the play.

ONE THOUSAND NIGHTS

OUR AMERICAN

COUSIN

BENEFIT of Miss JENNIE GOURLAY
THE OCTOBER
EDWIN ADAMS
 THE PRISONER OF ATHENS



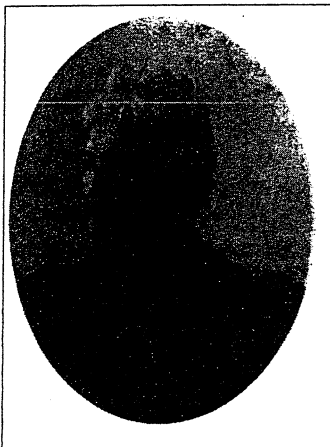
A HISTORY OF US

The giant sufferer lay extended diagonally across the bed, which was not long enough for him....Robert, his son, stood at the head of the bed. He bore himself well, but on two occasions gave way...and sobbed aloud...leaning on the shoulder of Senator Sumner.

—GIDEON WELLES

The soldiers are wild with rage to think that this great and good man who did so much for our land should be stricken down in the hour of victory.

—ELISHA RHODES



Elizabeth Keckley, born a slave, was Mary Todd Lincoln's friend and confidante.

something in Latin, and was gone. A woman screamed and a voice cried out, *The president has been shot*. And everyone knew that this was no act. It was real.

Abraham Lincoln died the next day in the place he was carried to—a small house across the street from the theater. It was April 15, 1865.

That very same day Andrew Johnson was sworn in as president. A month and a half earlier, on the day of Lincoln's second inauguration, when Johnson was named vice president, he had embarrassed everyone by being drunk.

The Whole World Bowed in Grief

A few hours after her husband's death, Mary Todd Lincoln asked Elizabeth Keckley to come and be with her. Keckley, born a slave, was a successful Washington seamstress, a friend of Mary Lincoln, and an almost daily visitor to the White House. Here, Keckley writes of that time:

When [Mrs. Lincoln] became a little quiet, I asked and received permission to go into the Guests' Room, where the body of the President lay in state. When I crossed the threshold of the room, I could not help recalling the day on which I had seen little Willie lying in his coffin where the body of his father now lay. I remembered how the President had wept over the pale beautiful face of his gifted boy, and now the President himself was dead. The last time I saw him he spoke kindly to me, but alas! the lips would never move again. The light had faded from his eyes, and when the light went out the soul went with it!

What a noble soul was his—noble in all the noble attributes of God. Never did I enter the solemn chamber of death with such palpi-

tating heart and trembling footsteps as I entered it that day. No common mortal had died. The Moses of my people had fallen in his hour of triumph....When I entered the room, the members of the Cabinet and many distinguished people were grouped around the body of their fallen chief. They made room for me, and, approaching the body, I lifted the white cloth from the white face of the man that I had worshipped as an idol....There lurked the sweetness and gentleness of childhood, and the stately grandeur of godlike intellect. I gazed long at the face, and turned away with tears in my eyes and a choking sensation in my throat. Ah! never was a man so widely mourned before. The whole world bowed their heads in grief when Abraham Lincoln died.



The doctors attending Lincoln all remarked on his splendid, muscular physique, the body of a much younger man than his deeply lined face suggested.