

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER XL

- in carte de visite
- 1) Portrait of Lincoln used for distribution to friends and admirers. The original was by Brady, the above is reproduced from a print given the author by Mr. Lincoln's Secretary, John G. Nicolay.
 - 2) Carl Schurz in 1861.
 - 3) (Use note on print)
 - 4) Fac-simile of paragraph in Lincoln's hand from the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, now in the State Library at Albany, N. Y.
 - 5) Fac-simile of closing paragraph of Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation.

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CHAPTER XL

A President at Bay

A government is strong in war in proportion to its victories; it is cemented by success, cracked by defeat. Strong coalitions of long-time opponents are possible when all goes well, but old doubts, jealousies and ambitions break out with reverses. If defeat continues, you have soon a divided front and suspicion, quarrels and rivalries occupy more time than the business of war itself. All we can say is that this is the way men have always conducted themselves in every war.

The North before the close of 1861 began to run true to the historical example of human beings under these circumstances. Cracks began to show in the political, civil and military front - with every defeat things grew worse. The Second Battle of Bull Run was lost because of quarreling generals. The elections of the fall of 1862 showed that the country was so saturated with discontent that it was no longer capable of collective political action. The North seemed crumbling under Lincoln's hands. From every side events shrieked to him that he was a failure. Even his best friends, his most loyal supporters, did not spare him. Take Carl Schurz, as loyal a radical as there was in the Republican party, as warm a supporter of Lincoln. Schurz was in the army when the returns of

the fall elections came in, and he felt it his duty to tell the President that it was his fault:

"Listen a moment," he said, to the words of a true friend. . . . The defeat of the administration is the administration's own fault

"It admitted its professed opponents to its counsels. It placed the army, now a great power in this Republic, into the hands of its enemies. In all personal questions to be hostile to the party of the Government seemed to be a title to consideration. It forgot the great rule, that, if you are true to your friends, your friends will be true to you, and that you make your enemies stronger by placing them upon an equality with your friends. Is it surprising that the opponents of the administration should have got into their hands the government of the principal states after they have had for so long a time the principal management of the war, the great business of the National Government?"

Hard words from a friend to a President at bay. Point by point he took up Schurz' letter. To the paragraph quoted above he replied: "

"The plain facts, as they appear to me, are these. The administration came into power, very largely in a minority of the popular vote. Notwithstanding this, it distributed to its party friends as nearly all the civil patronage as any administration ever did. The war came. The administration could not even start in this, without assistance outside of its party. It was mere nonsense to suppose a minority could put down a majority in rebellion. Mr. Schurz (now Gen. Schurz) was about here then, and I do not recollect that he then considered all who were not republicans, were enemies of the government, and that none of them must be appointed to military positions. He will correct me if I am mistaken. It so happened that very few of our friends had a military education or were of the profession of arms. It would have been a question whether the war should be conducted on military knowledge, or on political affinity, only that our own friends (I think Mr. Schurz included) seemed to think that such a question was inadmissible. Accordingly I have scarcely appointed a democrat to a command, who was not urged by many republicans and opposed by none. It was so as to McClellan. He was first brought forward by the Republican Governor of Ohio & claimed, and contended for at the same time by the Republican Governor of Pennsylvania. I

received recommendations from the republican delegation in Congress, and I believe every one of them recommended a majority of democrats. But, after all, many Republicans were appointed; and I mean no disparagement to them when I say I do not see that their superiority of success has been so marked as to throw great suspicion on the good faith of those who are not Republicans."

There was more of this correspondence. In a second letter Lincoln wrote:

"I certainly know that if the war fails the administration fails, and that I will be blamed for it whether I deserve it or not. I ought to be blamed if I could do better, you think I could do better therefore you blame me already; I think I could not do better, therefore I blame you for blaming me. . . . If I discard my own judgment and take yours I must also take that of others, and by the time I should reject all that I should be advised to reject I should have none left not even yours for be sure, my dear Sir, there are men that think you are performing your part as poorly as you think I am performing mine." - the truth of which statement Schurz was later to realize.

A frank correspondence surely, but on neither side a bitter one; and its close so "like Lincoln," for no sooner had he sent the letter from which the last paragraph is quoted than he was afraid he had been too tart, so he summoned Schurz to Washington.

Long ago General Schurz himself told me the story of the interview - a break in his voice as he talked. He found Lincoln sitting before an open fire, and instead of the stern greeting that he had expected, there was a warm hand clasp. "Now, tell me," Lincoln said, "do you think I am as bad a fellow as you made out in your letter?"

Schurz stammered some half apology. "Let me tell you all about it." The President then reviewed the events that had led up to the present conditions - his disappointments, his fears, his difficulties, how this and that man had failed him, why he had done this and not that, the torrents of blame and anger that had poured on him. Schurz' letter, he said, had been a kind of last

straw, coming as it did when he was feeling so keenly the defeat in the elections. He reviewed the whole hard story, and then suddenly turning with a laugh, slapped Schurz on the knee:

"Didn't I get you hard in the letter? Didn't I? But it didn't hurt, did it? I didn't mean to, and therefore I wanted you to come so quickly."

No wonder that Carl Schurz was bound to Abraham Lincoln for life after this or that he should have written years later: "There are men now living who would read today with amazement if not with regret what they then ventured to say or write to him."

But Schurz was his friend, however censorious, and, more important, open in his censure, untainted by personal jealousy or ambition. This, alas, was not always true of his critics. There was Mr. Chase, his Secretary of the Treasury, still sure that he was a better man than Lincoln, that it was he who should have been President. Seward had felt the same, but he and Lincoln had had it out, and Lincoln had won. To Mrs. Seward, his only real confidant, the Secretary of State said frankly, "The President is the best of us" - but he did not say that outside! So far as possible he kept up the fiction that he was master, assuming authority, keeping information from his colleagues, meddling in the affairs of other departments, particularly that of poor Secretary Welles, whose records of these interferences are among the most humanly entertaining that have come down to us from the period.

Probably Lincoln saw something of this, but it did not distress him; he could work with Seward. He admired his ability -

liked him, and, above all, he wanted the country to believe in him. What he did not see clearly, or, if he saw it, appraise it at its true value, was that Seward's pretence was accepted as a fact by a large group of radicals who mistrusted him. They had come to believe that the conservative Secretary of State did rule and that Lincoln's tardiness about issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, which they had so long urged, was due to the Secretary of State.

Mr. Chase, in an indirect way, had fed this suspicion. As we saw when we were going with Lincoln over the making of his cabinet, he had chosen Chase and Seward deliberately to represent the two strong wings of the Republican party - Democrat and Republican, radical and conservative. In his quaint way he explained that he had to have a pumpkin on each end of his bag if he was going to ride. But Mr. Chase had never been able to stay quietly in the end of the bag. He wanted to be President - wanted it particularly in 1864, and in this ambition he had the open backing of his brilliant daughter, Kate Chase. No woman in Washington, to Mrs. Lincoln's ill-concealed disgust, had such a following. Perhaps no American woman in Washington has ever had such a political following; it was much more like the kind of thing that we see in French and English political circles than anything we are accustomed to here. Miss Chase expected to make her father the next president of the United States, and everybody knew it.

From the beginning of the war, Mr. Chase had carried

on the questionable practice of expressing in private conversation and in a voluminous private correspondence, particularly with army officers and always with army officers more or less in disgrace - his distress at the way things were going, his sense of the incompetency of Lincoln, his disbelief in this or that promotion or removal - always hinting that if he had been president things would have been different, the war at an end. He was always asking the disgruntled to come to see him, ^{and} always complained to them that his ideas were not considered, that a Secretary of the Treasury had no business except to provide money for the people to spend. The whole inference among radicals, particularly radicals in Congress, was that this man, their friend, who should have led in the cabinet, was suppressed and that his conservative rival, Mr. Seward, was on top, the real head of the administration.

There is no question but that among those to whom Chase most frequently complained were radical congressmen. It was inevitable of course that when these congressmen came back to Congress in December, after their drubbing in the fall elections, that they felt they must work quickly to save the day. Many of them thought, and they may have been right, that if the new Congress with its small Republican majority, had met in December of 1862, a movement for immediate peace would have been successful. The radicals meant to go so far with their aggressive policy that this could not happen when it did finally meet the coming March, and one thing that they were determined upon was that the evil influence which had been paralyzing the

administration should be removed. Naturally enough, Mr. Chase's friends expected that he would then come into his own; that is, that Mr. Lincoln would be run hereafter by Chase instead of Seward.

If Mr. Lincoln could have given Congress a victory in the Eastern field immediately before or after it met, as he had so ardently hoped, he would have held back his congressional critics. But there was no victory - instead, another crushing defeat.

Everything had been disappointing in the Army of the Potomac after the battle of Antietam on September 17. McClellan had delayed again, with excuses which maddened Lincoln - "sore tongued and fatigued horses!" "Will you pardon me for asking," he wrote in an outburst of sarcasm - that sarcasm of which he was a master but which he so rarely used these days - "Will you pardon me for asking what the horses of your army have done since the battle of Antietam which fatigues anything?"

That the Confederates should be able to move and he not, that they should dash into Maryland and dash back again, drive him into battle - he so superior in numbers and equipment, and they always escape, had become humiliating almost beyond endurance. There were many men saying, and had been for a year - men like Senator Trumbull, the friend whose very position in the Senate was due to Lincoln, "If the case were reversed and the South had our means and our arms and men and we theirs, they would before this have driven us to the St. Lawrence." Trumbull did not hesitate to declare: "It is the fault of the President - he's weak, the tool of Seward."

McClellan had moved in November, and Lincoln had made with himself a half superstitious compact: if the General allowed Lee to get between him and Richmond again, he would displace him. McClellan had done just that, and the President had displaced him, with a corps commander, General Ambrose Burnside.

Lincoln has been much criticized for this appointment. Why didn't he call Sherman or Grant or Thomas from the West? They were fighters. Trust, but Sherman and Grant and Thomas were all on serious jobs. No one of them had as yet a campaign or a victory to his credit sufficient to say with certainty, "He's the man!" They were all still proving themselves. He took the best he had, and it turned out a poor best, for towards daybreak of December 16, after four days fighting on the Rappahannock, the President, who all the day before had sat in dressing gown and slippers in the military telegraph offices with Secretary Stanton, reading the reports as they came in, was sent Burnside's fatal word: "I have thought it necessary to withdraw the army to this side of the river."

Ten thousand men dead - two thousand missing! "Not a battle a butchery," Governor Curtin of Pennsylvania told the President when he arrived in Washington from the battle field. The horrible story broke his control, and Curtin describes his sorrow and nervous excitement as bordering on insanity. It was always to be so now. Bad news from the army would wring from him most pitiful cries of suffering. "If to be the head of Hell is as hard as what I have to undergo here," he told General

who was with him once when a report of a disaster came in, "I could find it in my heart to pit Satan himself."

Little wonder that Congress raved or the country despaired. And no wonder at all that the radical Republican group in the Senate, sure that they knew where the weakness lay, should have decided in caucus that the President should be told that he must drop Seward.

One man in this caucus, Senator Preston King of New York, objected, and rushed to tell Seward. Seward, so confident of his power, was overwhelmed - but game. He at once wrote his resignation. It was handed to the President the evening of the 17th of December, when he was still receiving the terrible news of Burnside's defeat. What did it mean? Seward, of all men! He was not long in learning from Senator King himself what had happened. A little later he was called upon by the Senators, nine of them, among them Trumbull and Sumner, his intimates. They charged Seward with ever sin, and especially with controlling the administration. "They seemed to think," Lincoln told his cabinet the next day when he had called them together to tell them what had happened, "that when I had any good intention in me, Seward contrived to suck it out of me unperceived."

It was quite characteristic of Lincoln that in this extraordinary interview with the Senators, he should have kindly and patiently tried to get a full statement from each man of his feeling, sound it, get to the bottom of it. He defended his cabinet, on the whole it had been harmonious, there had never been serious

troubles although of courses differences, but that in all overwhelming troubles they had sustained him. He seems not to have intimated to the gentlemen that they were encroaching on his rights.

The next morning he called his cabinet. All were there except the resigned Seward. He told them the story, and asked them to meet the committee that evening, which they did, to the great surprise of the Committee. This was putting a new face on the thing. Their ideas was not at all to talk over the situation with the body that they had been condemning; it was to demand its reorganization. There was much talk, one the whole frank - everybody, perhaps, frank except Mr. Chase, who, as Trumbull said tartly when he went away, talked differently in the presence of the President and his colleagues from what he had been accustomed to talk with him in private.

Chase certainly went away unhappy, he had not had the courage in the group and before the cabinet to back up resolutely the impression which he had been building up, consciously or unconsciously, for so long among his radical sympathizers. He must have had a sickening sense of having put himself in a box, and the only way he saw out of it was to resign. Let the President dump his pumpkins, find new ones, or try to ride without them. And he wrote his resignation.

Mr. Welles to whom we owe the most interesting pages that we have on this affair, could not sleep that night, so distressed was he by the situation, so wrote up his diary. Among other comments is this: "A senatorial combination to dictate to the President in regard to his political family, in the height of

a civil war which threatens the existence of the Republic, cannot be permitted to succeed even if the person to whom they object were as obnoxious as they represent; but Seward's foibles are not serious failings" - a good deal from the Secretary of the Navy who certainly had had more to suffer than anybody else from Seward's meddlesomeness. The next morning Welles went early to tell the President that he believed it his duty to see that the Senators did not succeed. That was the way it struck him, Lincoln replied. Be as the Senators ordered and the government could not hold water, the bottom would be out. But what to do? How save the bottom?

The Secretaries were soon back, from a night's wrestling with their individual duty in the matter, probably all of them willing to go out now for good, so unhappy was the situation, and yet too manly on the whole to be willing to leave if the President wanted them to stay. Chase first showed the white feather. "I have prepared my resignation," he told the President.

"Where is it?" said the President quickly, his eye lighting up," - I am quoting from Welles' diary. "I brought it with me," said Chase, taking the paper from his pocket; 'I wrote it this morning.' 'Let me have it,' said the President, reaching his long arm and fingers towards Chase, who held on, seemingly reluctant to part with the letter, which was sealed, and which he apparently hesitated to surrender. Something further he wished to say, but the President was eager and did not perceive it, but took it and hastily opened the letter.

"This," said he, looking towards me with a triumphal laugh, 'cuts the Gordian knot.' An air of satisfaction spread over his countenance such as I had not seen for some time. 'I can dispose of this subject now without difficulty,' he added, as he turned on his chair; 'I see my way clear.'

"Chase sat by Stanton, fronting the fire; the President beside the fire, his face towards them, Stanton nearest him. I was on the sofa near the east window. While the President was reading the note, which was brief, Chase turned round and looked towards me, a little perplexed. He would, I think, have been better satisfied could this interview with the President have been without the presence of others, or at least if I was away. The President was so delighted, that he saw not how others were affected.

"Mr. President," said Stanton, with solemnity. 'I informed you day before yesterday that I was ready to tender my resignation. I wish you, sir, to consider my resignation at this time in your possession.'

"You may go to your department," said the President: 'I don't want yours. This,' holding Chase's letter, 'is all I want; this relieves me; my way is clear; the trouble is ended. I will detain you no longer.'

Nobody knew what it meant - except Mr. Lincoln! The two pumpkins now lay in the same position, both out of the bag. It was not Seward out and Chase in, disturbing the equilibrium - they were both out. This was the last thing that the senatorial committee wanted. It was Seward they were after, not Chase; and the upshot of their demand had been that they had lost their own man.

For a couple of days there was unhappiness in radical circles, particularly in poor Mr. Chase's heart; and then Mr. Seward and Mr. Chase each received from the President a letter, saying that "after most anxious consideration," he had concluded that the public interests did not admit their resigning, there was nothing else, under the circumstances, for them to do but to go back to their departments. Seward did it cheerfully, Chase uneasily.

For the time the trouble was over. He had proved the master in the Senatorial attempt to invade his authority. Defeat rarely makes an opponent your friend, particularly an opponent of like Trumbull. radical temperament. They still believed, that Lincoln was a weakling, unable to see the quality of the mastery that he had shown in this contest.

"A weakling" - that was what the country thought, as the year drew to its close. Never was Abraham Lincoln so low in public esteem as when 1862 came to an end. He knew it - more than once he had said in crises, as he had said to his cabinet when he read the preliminary draft of the Emancipation Proclamation to them: "I know very well that many others might in this matter as in others

do better than I can; and if I was satisfied that the public confidence was more fully possessed by any one of them than by me, and knew of any constitutional way in which he could be put in my place, he should have it. I would gladly yield it to him." But there was no way as he told Seward who said in the cabinet crisis I have just described that it would be a relief to be free: "That will do very well for you, Governor, but I am like the starling in Sterne's story, 'I can't get out.'"

He could not get out, and they stoned him in his cage. At this moment, the end of the year, one stone they threw was doubt that he had resolution to make good his promise to sign the Emancipation Proclamation. The day was approaching that he had set, January 1, 1863; he would not do it - Seward, the pro-slavery forces were too strong for him. Men came to reproach him for a rumored weakness. They still had much to learn about their man, for it was as certain as anything could be certain that if Abraham Lincoln was alive on January first, he would put his name to the document.

As the year ended, he probably summed up the situation in very much the philosophical way that Gideon Welles did in his diary: "The year closed less favorably than I had hoped and expected," Welles wrote the night of December 31, "yet some progress has been made. . . . None of us appear to do enough, and yet I am surprised we have done so much."

They had done something men were never to forget. A document lay on Lincoln's office table awaiting his signature, which was the

the beginning of the end of the legal life of African slavery in the United States. After three hours of New Year's hand-shaking, Lincoln went back to his office for its signing. As he held the pen over the document, he remarked to those who stood by that never in his life had he felt more certain that he was doing right than he did in signing this paper. "But", he added, "I have been receiving calls and shaking hands since nine o'clock this morning until my arm is stiff and numb. Now this signature is one that is going to be examined closely, and if they find my hand trembling they will say, 'He did have some compunctions' - anyway it is going to be done."

We can believe it true, as he said, that he never was surer in his life that he was right. And yet he, better than anyone else, foresaw the difficulties that this act, so right, would bring. His secretaries quote a great remark that he made one day, in discussing the Proclamation - a remark which men who lead in new paths of any nature would do well to ponder:

"We are like whalers who have been on a chase. We have at last got the harpoon into the monster, but we must now look how we stir or with one flop of his tail he will send us all into eternity."