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Third Woman in Lincoln's Life

For weeks the little pioneer town of New Salem and all the Sangamon County around had been parched by drought and heat. The August fields and forests had lost all greenness and lay dusty and yellowed sweltering under a torrid sun and tireless hot winds. Fever had followed in the wake of drought and there were few of the scattered homes on the bluff where the town lay, or along the river which flowed at its feet which it had not entered. One home in particular had suffered - that of James Rutledge. It was a large family, nine children, and the brunt of the nursing fell heaviest on Ann, the oldest daughter, a girl of twenty-two, who for years now had been her mother's chief lieutenant, whatever the family joys or burdens. In the present crisis she had help. Sickness in a pioneer settlement calls out the full sympathy, the untiring self-sacrifice of neighbors. They give their strength to nursing as long as nursing is needed and if the day comes when care fails and death takes his victim, they build the coffin, dig the grave, weep and pray by its open mouth. That done they pass on to another bed side.

At the Rutledge's one friend in particular had stood by - Abraham Lincoln. Not only out of sympathy for the Rutledge family, his friends since he had first joined the community, but because of his anxiety for Ann, the fear that the burden she was carrying would be too much, that fever might in time claim her and that she would be too worn to resist the attack. That he could not bear. Ann and Lincoln were betrothed, in another year hoped to be married. His happiness in her love was something beyond anything he had ever dreamed could come to him. It had the quality of the eternal. To lose her now was unthinkable.

But this unthinkable sorrow was close at hand and when it came it ended the only romance of Abraham Lincoln's life.

It was not strange that he reeled under the blow. Up to the time he and Ann Rutledge had found each other there had been little in Abraham Lincoln's life but hard and sordid realities. He had known nothing of the gentler joys, never dreamed of a relation which could shed a glamour on daily living, give -

---"barrows trays and pans

Grace and glimmer of romance."

love

And now the dreams/had awakened, all hope
 were
 of their fulfillment/gone. Years later he was to write to
 a young friend bereaved by the death of her father. "In
 this sad world of ours sorrow comes to all; and to the young
 it comes with bittered agony, because it takes them unawares."
 He had been taken unawares.

The touchstone of a man's fiber is sorrow.

Will he bear it? Can he bear it? More than one friend of
 Abraham Lincoln's in the weeks following Ann Rutledge's
 death asked himself the question as he saw the man apathetic
 and brooding, neglecting all the interests which had filled
 his days, watched him going again and again to the distant
 yard where Ann lay, heard him cry out that he could not bear
 the thought of rain and ^{snow} sun on her grave. But these friends
 were wise. Among them was an understanding pair who had
 befriended Lincoln from his first coming to New Salem, whose home
 had always been open to him. They now took him in, nursed
 the fever which had tormented him for weeks and which he had
 neglected in caring for others, and best of all gave him the
 natural, unquestion^{ing}, unnoticing companion^{ship} which to those who
 suffer is a balm of Gilead.

"He must fight it himself. Don't mind him.
 Let him alone." Such was their simple and profound understanding
 of the needs of a sick soul.

Slowly but surely the treatment did its work. As the fever passed and strength began to flow again through his body his mind rallied; he thought less of his misery and more of the kindness and needs of those about him. "He's picking up," they said to each other and indeed he was. A month gone and he was going his old rounds again. Pale, emaciated, not himself to be sure, but again attending to his duties as postmaster of New Salem, again out with his compass and chain and rod following his work ^{as} of a deputy surveyor, again riding or walking back and forth from Springfield for the books he was studying preparing to beginning the practice of law the next year. And then there were the excitements and the struggles of politics. He was now a member of the Illinois Legislature and in December left New Salem for the winter term at the State Legislature, Vandalia. ¶ The change was a tonic. He at once threw himself into the thick of things - important and stirring questions - the Bank of the United States - internal improvements - the public lands - railroads and canals - the Convention system - the removal of the Capital to a more convenient and central part of the state - working with all his might he kept his sorrow to himself, deadened it and when late in February he went back to New Salem he was its master and well it was so for New Salem was a dreary spot to return to. The town was dying, its hope of being a

prosperous center gone. In May Lincoln lost his job as postmaster, the office being discontinued. One by one he saw his old neighbors moving away, many of them to the town site near by which ironically enough he, himself, had surveyed, plotted. Still there was politics; there was the law reading, his chain and compass. He was busy enough, perhaps busier than ever, but he was still in his friends minds not himself - too sober in his best moods, too often beset by what they called "blues", fits of dark melancholia which even worried him. He did not dare carry a pocket knife, he told a friend once, lest in one of his black spells he take his own life.

It was the women who noted him particularly. One of them a woman of cultivation, observing and reflective, one who had been Ann Rutledge's confidant and always his friend, said to herself, "He's growing up." Years later she was to tell that with ~~that winter~~ Ann Rutledge's death Lincoln began to be a man.

There was another woman, an old friend of his who said to herself, Lincoln must marry, have a home, that alone will cure him. She had a wife for him, her own sister - Mary Owens, a Kentucky girl, who two years earlier had visited in New Salem/whom Lincoln of course remembered.

One day when Lincoln came to see this Mrs. Abell by name, friendly match-maker/ she said, teasingly, "I am going down to Kentucky. If I bring Mary back will you marry her?" A challenge - what could he say but yes. But as he was to tell a friend months later, "Between you and me I was confoundly well pleased with the idea."

Pleased at the ideal Had he forgotten Ann Rutledge? Does one ever forget an idyllic love? or lose it? It becomes part of the being. This girl's love, though lost, had made a man of Lincoln. ~~Now~~ a man needs a mate, a family, a home, not for himself alone if he is a pioneer. He then owes it to the community, the country he is helping build. No one realized this better than Lincoln. The family made pioneering possible, alone held men to their labors.

Now Lincoln had made no morbid renunciation of life, tempted as he may have been in the early days of his grief. He had accepted it; he knew that he needed more than ever human love, companionship, care. In this he was every whit a man. How about this Mary Owens who might soon be there in New Salem? Was she the one he needed?

Whatever of raillery there had been in Mrs. Abell's suggestion, and obviously there was at least a spice, it disappeared from Lincoln's mind in the weeks after she

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left New Salem for her Kentucky visit. He became more and more serious about the conversation. What had he done? He had promised to marry Mary Owens. If she came back with her sister would it mean that she would regard him as a suitor, was willing to consider him as a husband? It scared him a little. Still if Mary Owens would make him a home he was willing to make her his wife, he concluded.

He remembered her - all New Salem did for she was such a one as a pioneer settlement does not often see - a woman a year his senior, twenty-eight, buxom, fresh of face, blue-eyed, gay, intelligent, well educated, reported wealthy and looking wealthy to the simple New Salemites - "the finest trimmings I ever saw," one of them has declared. Why should Lincoln have not been pleased to see her again, to think of her as a possible wife? But his inexperience and awkwardness in dealing with women made him hesitant, doubtful, and when he learned a few weeks later that the girl had returned with her sister he was startled, jumped to the conclusion that the two were taking him at his word, that she had come to marry him! He did not like it, he found. Reflecting on his predicament he found a ray of hope. Possibly Mrs Abell had never repeated his remark, in that case he was still free. He would withhold judgment until he saw her. That happened a few days later and the

distaste he had felt at the news that she was in the community was intensified by her appearance. She was not as attractive as he remembered her, was too stout, had lost her teeth, looked weather beaten. Well, he would keep his word. He had always made a point of holding to a promise, he would keep to this one, if Mary Owens regarded it as such. But how was he to find out?

He seemed not to have had the courage or adroitness to find out how seriously Mary Owens was taking him. He could neither force or drop the issue. He simply hung around, making himself her attendant, at all the country-side gatherings, doing what he supposed was expected of a suitor, excepting the courting! There was certainly no word of that from him. From Mary Owens, much more experienced than he in love-making, there was coquetry, tantalizing words which puzzled him - did they mean that she expected to be his wife - well, suppose he thought of her as his wife, remembered only her fine qualities of mind, her interest in affairs, her love of good books, her jolly humor, her liking for people, her fresh enjoyment of life, forgot her disappointing appearance. He tried but somehow it left him unstirred. For him Mary Owens had no allurements, no charm, but if she expected him to marry her he would do it.

It evidently did not occur to him that Mary Owens might be appraising him rather than trying to force an avowal. She certainly was too clever a woman not to realize that he was still reluctant and half-hearted whether he had taken his promise to her sister seriously or not. She appreciated his fine qualities, his manliness, kindness, loyalty, she saw he was making his way in the community, was a coming man, not a hopeless partner even for a girl whose father was as she said "a gentleman of considerable means," if she found herself caring for him.

Could she care for him? That was what she on her side was asking herself while her sister devotedly attached to Lincoln was urging her to make up her mind to marry him, evidently persuaded that Mary could do it if she would.

The half-hearted suit was cut short in December when the winter session of the State Assembly to which Lincoln had been re-elected the previous summer opened. Quite promptly after reaching Vandalia, the State Capitol, he wrote Mary Owens, a rather moody letter, principally politics but with a bid for sympathy. He had been sick ever since he left her. He dreaded writing her and having the mortification of looking in the post office for an answer and not finding it as had once happened, since he knew her, - his spirits were so low that he would rather

be any place in the world, he couldn't endure the thought of staying there ten weeks as was expected of him. "Write back as soon as you get this," he pled, "and if possible say something that will please me for really I have not been pleased since I left you," which would seem to indicate that the young man was more interested in "Friend Mary", as he called her than he thought.

In spite of the opening gloom of the session things soon brightened up for Lincoln. Mary Owens yielded to his plea, and did write him occasionally throughout the term. He found friends, among them a woman, the wife of a colleague in the Assembly, O. H. Browning. The Brownings and Lincoln lived in the same house and he and Mrs. Browning were soon on easy and rather confidential terms, a friendship which lasted his life through. But chiefly his spirits were restored by the place he soon found himself taking in the Sangamon County delegation - a delegation famous in Illinois State annals - the Long Nine, no one of them under six feet in height! The Long Nine had set their hearts on taking the seat of government from Vandalia to Springfield and spent the session in the fight. Lincoln, who had had but one previous term in the Assembly and in that term had done little more than get his bearings, threw himself into the struggle with gusto and a skill which surprised his

colleagues and soon made him the leader of the group. The Long Nine won and Mary Owens heard men on all sides saying that Lincoln was a "born leader," heard of banquets where he was toasted as "nature's nobleman." Quite a different person in the public's eye, this young man who came back to New Salem in May 1837 from the one who had left the December before.

He did not return to stay. He had been admitted to the bar and in April put all his worldly goods into a pair of saddle bags and rode over to Springfield, sixteen miles away, where he meant to establish himself permanently.

In a farewell visit he and Mary Owens talked about her joining him there, but he could not decide whether she was in earnest or not, and was not deeply enough in love to insist on knowing.

Moving to Springfield did not settle his unrest as he may have expected and half hoped. He could not keep the thought ^{of her} out of his mind, but he could not feel her in his heart. To marry when he did not love, was it worth giving up his freedom for that, exchanging it for the home - wholesome, gay, comfortable, he was certain she would make?

Now Mary Owens was a sensible if a flirtatious woman and she had no desire to marry a man who did not love her or one who did not instinctively pay her all those attentions

which she had been reared to believe a man owed a woman. Lincoln disappointed her by his awkwardness, his absentmindedness, his indisposition to gallantry. She tells a story in one of her letters of a happening we may consider typical.

"There was a company of us going to Uncle Billy Greene's. Mr. Lincoln was riding with me, and we had a very bad branch to cross. The other gentlemen were very officious in seeing that their partners got safely over. We were behind, he riding on, never looking back to see how I got along. When I rode up beside him, I remarked, 'You are a nice fellow! I suppose you did not care whether my neck was broken or not.' He laughingly replied (I suppose by way of compliment), that he knew I was plenty smart to take care of myself."

He had not learned - he never did learn - that no woman was ever born who did not prefer from a man she is thinking of marrying solicitude for her welfare, proofs that he had her safety and happiness on his mind, to any possible tribute he could pay her intellect.

The uncertainty greatly disturbed Lincoln. What did the girl want? He was lonesome in the new town. He knew he would be happier if she was with him. He must settle the matter. He began a letter, but it displeased him. It was too

serious. He began another, tore it up, it was too flippant. The third he sent. It began with a rather dreary picture of his life in Springfield - "dull business," he called it. "I am quite as lonesome here as I ever was anywhere in my life. I have been spoken to by but one woman since I have been here, and should not have been by her if she could have avoided it. I've never been to church yet, and probably shall not be soon. I stay away because I am conscious I should not know how to behave myself."

Then followed a discussion of their relations well calculated to settle the matter for any spirited woman. It was almost as if he wrote, "I will marry you if you want me, but I can easily get on without you." But here are the paragraphs:-

"I am often thinking of what we said about your coming to live at Springfield. I am afraid you would not be satisfied. There is a great deal of flourishing about in carriages here, which it would be your doom to see without sharing it. You would have to be poor, without the means of hiding your poverty. Do you believe you could bear that patiently? Whatever woman may cast her lot with mine, should any ever do so, it is my intention to do all in my power to make her happy and contented; and there is nothing I can imagine that would make me more unhappy than to fail in the effort. I know I should be much

happier with you than the way I am, provided I saw no signs of discontent in you. What you have said to me may have been in the way of jest, or I may have misunderstood it. If so, then let it be forgotten; if otherwise, I much wish you would think seriously before you decide. What I have said I will most positively abide by, provided you wish it. My opinion is that you had better not do it. You have not been accustomed to hardship, and it may be more severe than you now imagine. I know you are capable of thinking correctly on any subject, and if you deliberate maturely upon this before you decide, then I am willing to abide your decision."

The letter brought no satisfactory reply.

Mary Owens was probably enjoying the irresolute courting too much to end it by the resolute word of which/^{she} was capable.

Possibly she did not yet quite know her own mind. Her sister continued to urge her to marry Lincoln. The man probably had a future. In many things they were congenial spirits, but she was more and more realizing, and she was to write later, that he was "deficient in those little links, which make up the chain of woman's happiness. His training had been different from mine." And so she hesitated, while he unwilling to settle the matter once for all in the way he seems to have thought he wanted it settled, that is by his own honorable release, continued his luke warm wooing.

Finally desperate he decided to write a letter, which would force a decision from Mary Owens.

"You must know that I cannot see you or think of you with entire indifference; and yet it may be that you are mistaken in regard to what my real feelings towards you are. If I knew you were not, I should not trouble you with this letter. Perhaps any other man would know enough without further information, but I consider it my peculiar right to plead ignorance and your bounden duty to allow my plea.

"I want in all cases to do right; and most particularly so in all cases with women. I want, at this particular time, more than anything else, to do right with you, and if I knew it would be doing right, as I rather suspect it would, to let you alone, I would do it. And for the purpose of making the matter as plain as possible, I now say, that you can ~~now~~ drop the subject, dismiss your thoughts (if you ever had any) from me forever, and leave this letter unanswered, without calling forth one accusing murmur from me. And I will even go farther, and say, that if it will add anything to your comfort or peace of mind to do so, it is my sincere wish that you should. Do not understand by this that I wish to cut your acquaintance. I mean no such thing. What I do wish is that our further acquaintance shall depend upon yourself. If such further acquaintance would contribute nothing to your happiness, I am sure it would not to mine. If you feel yourself in any degree bound to me, I am now willing to release you, provided you wish it; while, on the other hand, I am willing and even anxious to bind you faster if I can be convinced that it will in any considerable degree add to your happiness. This, indeed, is the whole question with me. Nothing would make me more miserable, nothing more happy, than to know you were so.

"In what I have now said, I think I cannot be misunderstood; and to make myself understood is the sole object of this letter."

It was rather cruel in Mary Owens not to have ended this perplexity then and there but the woman had pride and humor. She may have thought he needed a lesson in love-making, to be taught that a man must at least have the courage to say

directly, will you marry me? Say it with arder, conviction and not with the chilling assurance that it is her happiness alone he seeks - that his own is only indirectly in question. At all events she kept him dangling on her hook until he did come out with a direct proposal, and to it she gave a prompt answer. "No."

Lincoln was amazed, surely she did not mean it. He repeated the question - "No" - she told him again, and so finally after a year and a half of apathetic love-making Lincoln awoke to the humiliating realization that he had been deceiving himself in thinking that Mary Owens happiness depended on marrying him, that his noble determination to do the right thing cost him what it might savored strongly of vanity and most painful of all that, now he had lost her he was really not a little in love with her!

There was rare breadth in Abraham Lincoln's humor; he could see his own follies. Sore as he was after Mary Owens' decision it was not many months before he was laughing at himself. The story was too good to go untold. Moreover, he needed a confessional, needed to share his humiliation. There was no one in Springfield to whom he could confide, but there was his friend, Mrs. Browning, and so finally he reeled off for her a long and farcical account of what had been happening to him since he last saw her a year before at the close of the

Assembly. He knew there was little or no likelihood of Mrs. Browning ever hearing of the episode from the outside, for Mary Owens had gone back to Kentucky and the Brownings had no connection with New Salem, so he let himself go in a droll story of his own stupidities in the affair, drawing in the course of it a caricature of Mary Owens' appearance which would have been unforgiveable if he had named her or if he had not been treating the experience in burlesque. Then he went on to tell how he in spite of his dislike of her looks he determined to consider her his wife.

"This done," he wrote, "all my powers of discovery were put to work in search of perfections in her which might be fairly set off against her defects. I tried to imagine her handsome, which, but for her unfortunate corpulency, was actually true. Exclusive of this, no woman that I have ever seen has a finer face. I also tried to convince myself that the mind was much more to be valued than the person; and in this she was not inferior, as I could discover, to any with whom I had been acquainted.

"All this while, although I was fixed, 'firm as the surge-repelling rock,' in my resolution, I found I was continually repenting the rashness which had led me to make it. Through life I have been in no bondage, either real or imaginary, from the thralldom of which I so much desired to be free. I now spent my time in planning how I might get along through life after my contemplated change of circumstances should have taken place, and how I might procrastinate the evil day for a time, which I really dreaded as much, perhaps more, than an Irishman does the halter.

"After all my suffering upon this deeply interesting subject, here I am, wholly, unexpectedly, completely, out of the 'scrape'; and now I want to know if you can guess how I got out of it - out, clear, in every sense of the term; no

violation of word, honor, or conscience. I don't believe you can guess, and so I might as well tell you at once. As the lawyer says, it was done in the manner following, to wit: After I had delayed the matter as long as I thought I could in honor do (which, by the way, had brought me round into the last fall), I concluded I might as well bring it to a consummation without further delay; and so I mustered my resolution, and made the proposal to her direct; but, shocking to relate, she answered, No. At first I supposed she did it through an affectation of modesty, which I thought but ill became her under the peculiar circumstances of her case; but on my renewal of the charge, I found she repelled it with greater firmness than before. I tried it again and again, but with the same success, or rather with the same want of success.

"I finally was forced to give it up; at which I very unexpectedly found myself mortified almost beyond endurance. I was mortified, it seemed to me, in a hundred different ways. My vanity was deeply wounded by the reflection that I had been too stupid to discover her intentions, and at the same time never doubting that I understood them perfectly; and also that she, whom I had taught myself to believe nobody else would have, had actually rejected me with all my fancied greatness. And, to cap the whole, I then for the first time began to suspect that I was really a little in love with her. But let it all go. I'll try and outlive it. Others have been made fools of by the girls; but this can never with truth be said of me. I most emphatically, in this instance, made a fool of myself."

He most emphatically had!

But Lincoln's affair with Mary Owens was but an episode in his emotional life, an awkward, half-touching, half-ludicrous episode. One may laugh at his self-deception as he did himself, but one can but honor his painful efforts to be honorable, to discharge to the full any obligation Mary Owens may have thought he had assumed. Few men, or women, reviewing the episodes scattered on their way to a final mating can

match his determination "in all things to stick to my word", his effort to weigh the chances of the woman's contentment and happiness if she should marry him. Usually we snatch at what we want considering but little what we can give to satisfy another. Taking that for granted in our pre-occupation with our own desire.

The episode is chiefly important, however, because it bears all the marks of emotions still dulled and unresponsive by the death of Ann Rutledge. A great sorrow leaves behind it an empty and cold heart, numb, insensible, imagination. Interest awakened as Lincoln's was awakened ^{in Mary Owens} is not an affair of the heart but an affair of the intellect - of calculation, reasoning, speculation. Lincoln's curious courtship of Mary Owens is convincing proof of the profundity of his grief ~~as~~ rather than as some would have it evidence that he never loved ^{her}. It ~~no~~ more undermines the romance than the argument that he could not have loved the girl because seven years after her death he married Mary Todd, and gave her a loyal affection - a weak and ignorant argument surely.

A virile man, honoring women, wanting a home, a family, needing them if ever a man did, it would have been unnatural, impossible to one of his reasonable nature, to let

his whole life be thwarted by the memory of an earlier love. Ann Rutledge was a memory! She had brought him a vision of what human love could be in sweetness, sympathy, purity. Her death had left him a sadder but not a weaker man. It was a grief which went into the making of the future man as all real experiences go into the making of human beings.

The men and women who brought this country to its present place in the world have left behind them records of lives rich in courage and practical idealism but thin in romance. When we do come upon the stuff in our annals it is the dearer for its rarity.

Possibly no one of the few stories of idealistic love in our history has deeper hold on the popular mind than this of Abraham Lincoln and Ann Rutledge. So dear to our people is this idyl that thousands of them yearly visit the girl's grave. You hear the reverent little groups reading aloud often with a choke in the voice, from the beautiful lines on the monument.

"I am Ann Rutledge who sleep beneath
these weeds
Beloved of Abraham Lincoln,
Wedded to him, not through union,
But through separation."

The popular heart is right, when it clings to this romance, rejoices that this man of so many agonies, so many disillusionments should have felt for even a day, a wind of sweetest hope blowing across his heart.