

Chubb. P. 111
~~2~~

"MADE A FOOL OF MYSELF" - A. LINCOLN *

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 that 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."

Again and again you hear one in the number who knows or thinks he knows the story repeating its outline:-

"Ann Rutledge was betrothed when Lincoln first came to New Salem; her lover left, ceased to write her; she and Lincoln learned to love each other;"- and then the melodramatic, though false ending -
"distracted on finding herself pledged to one man and loving another, Ann died of grief; Lincoln went insane and tried to kill himself."

The present generation of iconoclastic critics, who have been trying their hammers on our favorite legends, romances, heroes, -

* might use autograph

pleased to knock off a nose or a leg if they could not thoroughly shatter were sure sooner or later to reach this idyl. One of them has recently and we have the judgment - "One of the great myths of American History", which can mean nothing else than we are treasuring for our well-loved Lincoln and experience in happiness and tragedy with no base of reality. How about it?

Various are the evidences marshalled for the attack on the romance - none more curious than that Lincoln later made love to another woman!

The argument seems to be that if he had really loved the girl and grieved desperately on her death, he would never have revived sufficiently to think of asking another woman to be his wife.

The iconoclast who can employ such an argument is still a mid-victorian, judging human beings by what he thinks they should be rather than by what they are.

The story which is used to dim if not destroy the Ann Rutledge romance is not difficult to reconstruct. Indeed, it is one of those rare love affairs in the annals of great Americans where we have first hand documents. What He said, what She said - letters of Lincoln to the young woman - Mary Owens by name - letters of Mary Owens written years later giving her side of the affair. There are few dim places in the story. For most part it is as clear as day.

It seems that about a year after Ann Rutledge's death, a woman friend of Lincoln living near New Salem, laughingly said to him that she was paying a visit to her family in Kentucky and would bring back her sister, whom he had met

three years ago, if he would agree to become her brother-in-law.

"I of course accepted the proposal," wrote Lincoln to a confident later "for you know I could not have done otherwise had I really been averse to it; but privately between you and me I was most confoundly well pleased with the project."

And well he might have been if he were looking for a wife for Mary Owens was such a one as the pioneer settlement of New Salem did not often see - a woman within a year of his own age, buxom, fresh of face, blue-eyed, gay, intelligent, well educated, reported wealthy and looking wealthy to the simple New Salemites. "She had 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 when he learned a few weeks later that Mary Owens 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! Reflecting on his predicament he found a ray of hope. Possibly his remark had never been repeated; 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 aged. No wonder she was taking him at the word given her sister. Well, he would keep it. He had always made a point of holding to a promise, he would to this one - if Mary Owens regarded it as such. But how was he to find out?

He seems not to have had the courage or adroitness to either force or drop the issue. He simply hung around, making himself her attendant - at all the country-side gatherings, doing everything that 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 she mean that she expected to be his wife - well, he would think of her as his wife, remember 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. It was all true but somehow it left him unstirred. For him there was, he told himself, no allurements in Mary Owens, 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 made 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 urged her to make up her mind to marry him, evidently persuaded that Mary could do it if she would.

But Mary Owens was a sensible if 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 ^ahappening 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 in, 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.

His half-hearted suit was cut short in December, when the winter session of the State Assembly, to which he 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, Q. 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 March 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.

The uncertainty disturbed him. 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. "What you have said to me may have been in jest, or I may have misunderstood it," he wrote her, in his first letter after their parting. "For my part I have already decided. What I have said I will most positively abide by, provided you wish it," which was as if he said, "I will marry you if you want me, but I can easily get on without you."

He counselled her sagely, fearful lest he seem too anxious! "My opinion is you better not do it, you have not been accustomed to hardship, and it may be more severe than you imagine."

Now that he was in Springfield he was realizing as never before how poor a man he was and would be for a long time, compared with most of the men with whom he was associating on equal political and professional terms. He saw clearly he could not give a wife a home, the comforts these men gave their wives. How would Mary take that? "I am afraid you would not be satisfied", he told her. "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 property. Do you believe you could bear that patiently?"

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 had probably a future. In many things they were congenial spirits, but as she was to write later, she found him "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 thought he wanted it settled, that is by his own honorable release, continued his luke warm semi-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 ardor, 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 must 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 he still could laugh at himself. The story was too good to go untold and so sitting down he reeled off for his friends, Mrs. Browning 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 Owen's appearance which would have been unforgiveable if he had named her or if he had not been treating the experience in burlesque.

He confesses that when in the end the lady had finally convinced him she did not want him he was mortified almost beyond endurance.

"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."

Mr. & Mrs. Browning were highly amused by the letter which they took to be only another of the extravagant yarns with which Lincoln entertained intimates when in a rollicking mood. They kept it, now and then reading it to a friend as an illustration of the length to which he would sometimes go in fun-making. A biographer hearing of the letter in the Civil War asked to re-print it but when the Brownings sought Mr. Lincoln's permission he said no there was "too much truth in it." It was the first intimation his friends had that the letter was based on a personal experience.

A few years after Mr. Lincoln's death the letter was published "in the interest of truth" by a biographer who lamented what he called "an extremely painful duty." He did not have the wit to see that Lincoln was really ridiculing his own self-deception and that the shocking picture he drew of the anonymous lady was a device for emphasizing what he now looked on as his folly!

And it is this affair in which he tells Mrs. Browning he made a fool of himself that is used as evidence that he never could have loved Ann Rutledge!

That romance does not need to go a-begging for proof of its genuineness. To be sure there exists no surely authentic letters from Abraham Lincoln to Ann Rutledge from Ann Rutledge to Abraham Lincoln. No journals or diaries in which either put down a confession of love but of that evidence second in place in all biographical study the written recollections of family and friends there is a goodly amount. What did Ann's family, back there in New Salem in the 1830's believe? What did the men and women with whom Abraham Lincoln daily talked and walked think? Here we have solid ground for our romance since nearly or quite a score of those who knew both these young people - Ann's brothers and sisters, her uncle, her neighbors and friends - the neighbors and friends of Lincoln - have put down in writing what they saw, believed, remembered. That they should ever have done this was because of what Abraham Lincoln became. If, after the death of Ann Rutledge he had married and lived out an uneventful life in or near New Salem the story would long ago have been forgotten. Even the stir of gossip in New Salem when Ann's lost lover came back many weeks after her death, the speculation as to whether if she had lived she would have married him or Abraham Lincoln, would have been of only temporary interest.

But Lincoln rose steadily. When a man for whom a woman has been accustomed to "put on a plate", ^{make} a hole in a coat, put on a button whenever he dropped by, with whom her husband has pitched quoits,

told stories, argued, pushes up until twenty five years after their intimacy, he is talked about for the presidency of the United States, when the talk crystallizes until he is actually nominated and elected, why these early friends recall-and generally enlarge-all they remember of him. If they have known a girl he loved, lost, grieved for, they tell and retell the story. Few who lived in New Salem in the days of Abraham Lincoln and Ann Rutledge but remembered something of their romance.

Hardly was Abraham Lincoln in his grave indeed before the New Salem group was tapped for all that it remembered about the two, by one who could have scarcely been better prepared so far as personal acquaintance went. This man was William H. Herndon. Herndon was but eleven years old when Lincoln just settled in the "Sangomo Country" and went to live in the house of the boy's uncle. He early attached himself to Lincoln in boyish worship - became his political supporter - in 1839 entered his law office as a student, four years later became his law partner.

"Billy Herndon", as they called him, was a radical of the emotional type, a wide reader, an incoherent thinker, a "good fellow." Lincoln's personal relation to him was that of an elder brother guarding his weaknesses as far as possible, admiring his talents, warmed intellectually and spiritually, too, by Herndon's ardent interest in reform.

From the time that Lincoln became president it was Herndon's expressed intention to write his life. He began his task

immediately after the assassination of the president by appropriating all of the papers in their law office.- Robert Lincoln is said to have protested but without effect - and by undertaking to collect the personal recollections of scores of people with whom he knew Lincoln to have been associated in one way or another between birth and death. The documents he gathered are the more valuable because so many of them are from people close to Lincoln in years.

Herndon knew of the Ann Rutledge affair. He had known the girl - had often been in the family, so when he went to New Salem in 1866, note book in hand/nobody denied him - not the living Rutledges, where he sent out voluminous questionnaires, not even John McNamara, the lover who had so neglected Ann, still living on the farm where she had died.

Important in the collection of statements that Herndon secured at this time was one from the only man to whom we know Lincoln ever to have fully unburdened his heart, Joshua Speed of Louisville, Ky. In a letter from Speed to Herndon written at this time, he speaks of Lincoln's "early love of Miss Rutledge" as though it were a matter of common knowledge to Lincoln's friends.

It is on these remarks, most of them in manuscript, that biographers have based their belief that the romance of Ann Rutledge and Abraham Lincoln is solidly placed. Indeed, if this evidence is not to be accepted, then all the evidence coming from family and associates concerning this man must be thrown aside, and when would that leave us - or leave any great character?

It is a pity that the invaluable material which Mr. Herndon so patiently gathered back in 1866 should have been invalidated in many

minds by his own interpretation. He did not wait until his life of Lincoln was finished to give the story of Ann Rutledge, but eighteen months after Mr. Lincoln's assassination, gave it in a lecture delivered in Springfield (Ill.) - a lecture promptly published and circulated. In telling his story Mr. Herndon did not content himself with following his documents. He made from them a melodramatic and sensational tale of a young girl dying from despair because she found herself loving one man but bound by a promise to another, who had apparently deserted her. He pictured Lincoln insane from grief at her death, wandering over the country, babbling incoherent nonsense - long passages of which he improvises for his lecture - and finally saved from self-destruction by the interference of friends. These two interpretations, exaggerating the facts out of all proportion, destroying both the beauty and the reality of the relation shocked Mr. Lincoln's friends and followers. There were protests from those at home who knew the story - there was violent criticism from the outside; but the points on which Mr. Herndon had spent his turgid eloquence stuck in the popular mind; and today it is still told and retold that Ann Rutledge died of despair and Abraham Lincoln "went insane" because he had lost her.

Iconoclasts are abundantly justified in using their hammer on these distortions, but they waste their strength in attacking the romance. Wipe out the melodramatic features and the romance remains - not a myth as they would have us believe, but a well authenticated story of human love and hope and sorrow - a touching drama of pioneer life.

Certainly the validity of the romance is not weakened as is argued by the fact that a year after Ann's death Lincoln began his half-hearted advances to Mary Owens. This story, both pathetic and ludicrous, in which he plays so awkward a part, rather corroborates, to one who knows much of the ways of human hearts, the hold that Ann Rutledge had taken upon his affections.

It no more undermines the romance than the argument also employed that he could not have loved the girl because seven years after her death he married Mary Todd, and gave her to her death 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 however idealistic. Ann Rutledge was a memory. She had brought him a vision of what human love could be in its sweetness, its sympathy, its 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 popular heart is right, when it instinctively clings to this romance, rejoices that this man of so many agonies, so many disillusionments should have had for even a day, a breath of sweetest hope blowing across his heart.