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CHAPTER LI

The Country Learns of Lincoln's Death

No event in the history of this land has stirred men to such depths of grief and despair as the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. It came at so joyous a moment - the whole North exulting over the certainty that the war was ending; it carried with it the menace of so widespread, monstrous and threatening a conspiracy. And then there was the heart-breaking contrast between the mercifullness of the man that had been slain and the cruelty of the act. The thing struck men dumb for an instant and then there broke loose such a tide of passion as the country had never experienced.

The first effect on everyone - the humblest and the highest, young and old was so intense as actually to photograph on their memories the scene, the circumstances, the incidents of the moment when they received the news. This is an almost universal feature in the great store of personal records of the event which have come to us. I have talked with scores of people who were living at the time, and always they began their account of Lincoln's death with a picture of what they were doing at the moment they heard the news, even quoting the very words in which it was told them; often adding those homely details which give authenticity to their report. Here are fragments from my notes:-

" ..... a young teacher came in holding a black bordered newspaper and weeping as she told our household that the President had been shot. I remember that they trimmed our little spring hats with black and tied black ribbon bow-knots on our sleeves."

.....

"I was coming home from the market, with a family beefsteak, a man called across the street to another, 'Have you heard? - Lincoln's dead - shot last night.' I waited to hear no more but sped homeward as never before, bearing with me the direful tidings."

One of the most detailed stories among my notes was told me years ago by one of Lincoln's old neighbors in Springfield:-

"I was out feeding the hens when I heard it. I had been having a circus with a pig-headed black Leghorn that wanted to set in the mare's oat box, and I just got her shut in a barrel. She was quieting down and I was feeding the flock when Ma came running out carrying a china dish. She looked as though she could hardly speak, white as a sheet and I dropped the corn and said, 'What is it?' She gathered up her apron and covered her face and began to cry, and I went and patted her on the shoulder, and then she just burst out, 'Pa! Pa! They've shot Mr. Lincoln.'" See note on envelope

Hundreds of such homely and touching sketches have been set down. But it was not only humble people that wept with grief as the news filtered through the country. The men who sat around Lincoln's bed side watching his life dribble away - Sumner, Stanton, Welles and scores of others, more than once dropped their heads in their hands and sobbed aloud. Back in Illinois men wept in the streets. The entire town of Decatur seemed agonized at the news - men threw their arms around each other's shoulders and wept - and so it was everywhere.

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The popular sorrow was intensified by the impression of downright goodness. the Christlike spirit that Lincoln had made on the country, particularly in the last few weeks. The words from his last inaugural -"with malice toward none, with charity for all" had already passed into popular currency as, no doubt, he hoped they might. As we saw in the last article, he had gone deliberately to work from the time that he felt saw the end coming to build up in his cabinet, among the leaders in the army and Congress, and in the people themselves a feeling that a victor should be a man of mercy, that justice without mercy is in danger of becoming injustice, and that for the North now to be other than forgiving and helpful to those it had defeated would be to soil the peace and defeat the very ends for which they had fought, which was a union of the whole country. His spirit had taken hold, begun to spread, to soften many hard hearts. As the members of the cabinet left their last meeting with him on the morning of the 14th of April, Stanton, the most harsh and vengeful of them all, said to Attorney-General Speed, "Didn't our Chief look grand today?" That this man of mercy should be a victim broke the heart of the country.

But the outburst of grief was short. There came surging after it a terrible and dangerous anger - an anger at the South and its leaders, who in the first moment, naturally enough, were held responsible for the horror. T he attack on Seward, the belief that it was intended to slay Grant - as indeed it had been - the vice-president, Stanton - possibly to burn Washington; the belief that the

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Washington group of murderers was but one in a chain that was scattered the country over and from which they might hear at any moment, turned grief into a fierce determination not to be overwhelmed, stampeded - whatever might happen. This feeling was countrywide.

The Honorable John A. Kasson of Iowa, at that time a member of Congress and a warm friend of Lincoln's, was on his way home. His train was just leaving Davenport when somebody jumping onto the platform of the train as it moved out, shouted to him that Lincoln had been assassinated. Station after station was passed but there was no more news. Finally, leaving the train, Mr. Kasson took a stage for his home town. Here there was a telegraph office. Hurrying to it he found a little crowd of villagers, - working people - half dressed - listening in wrath and sorrow to the words which the operator slowly spelled out to them. "Not a word was spoken," Mr. Kasson said. "There was only the gloomy eyes and the firmly set teeth. It is one of the traditions of Iowa that on that night no Copperhead went forth from his house and that for days afterwards not one ventured to open his mouth anywhere in our prairie state. The Union heart was too deeply moved, it was solemn and wrathful, and there was danger in the air."

To the army now just ending its labors the news was a stunning blow. It silenced their songs. The men sat in sullen silence around their camp fires or marched almost speechless for days. Carl Schurz at this time was with the troops in Raleigh, N.C., and he wrote to Mrs. Schurz -

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"A thunder-clap from the blue sky could not have struck us more unexpectedly and frightfully. Our good, good Lincoln! Even now, whenever my thoughts drift to some other object and then return to this terrible event, I am obliged to ask myself whether it really can be true. The murderer who did this deed has killed the best friend of the South. It is really patricide. The people of the South may thank God that the war is over. If this army had been obliged to march once more upon the enemy, not a single house would have been left standing in their path. The soldiers sat about their camp-fires, first in gloomy consternation; then you might everywhere have heard the words, 'We wish that the fight were not over yet!' It is fortunate that it is over. If the war were continued now, it would resemble the campaigns of Attila."

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No record that we have of the times so well illustrates popular feeling as a meeting that was held at noon on Saturday in front of the New York Customs House in Wall Street. The early papers of Saturday, the 15th, carried to the city only the news of the attack on the President; it was late in the morning before his death was known, and the word spread slowly and uncertainly through the town. But the attack had been enough to arouse the city as it had not been aroused through the war. Passing down Broadway that morning there was not a smiling face to be seen, but everywhere bent brows, firmly pressed lips. Short work that morning was made of Southern sympathizers who dared to speak exultingly of the dreadful deed. More than one was beaten - more than one was chased to police shelter with cries of "Lynch him! Lynch him!" And one man was thrown from a river ferryboat and crushed in its wheels because he had rejoiced that "somebody had had the courage to kill the tyrant Lincoln."

A call for a public meeting in front of the Customs House was made by poster, and by noon Wall Street was packed with a white faced, silent crowd. The addresses were made from the balcony of the Customs House; the first to appear there was General Ben. Butler. On his arm was tied a long floating banner of crepe. To many in the crowd it was the first authentic verification of Lincoln's death. Many speeches were made that day by men of note - Daniel Dickenson, General Garfield, Samuel Fessenden, L. E. Chittenden. Through them all ran two notes - one of unutterable grief for the man slain - the other an angry determination to punish the assassins. General Butler in a broken voice described Lincoln as "the most forgiving,

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the most lenient, the most gracious friend that the misguided men of the Rebellion ever had"; even Garfield, as "the noblest and greatest heart that ever put down a Rebellion on this earth".

In every speech the same note, and with it went the fiercest denunciation of the Rebellion and its leaders. Among the speakers was the Honorable Daniel Dickenson - an old man then, with long flowing white hair. He had been aroused to a pitch of absolute fury by the news. "In all the history of men, savage and civilized, in the history of nations, ancient and modern," he shouted, as he hung over the railing of the Customs House balcony at an angle which made his friends behind hang to his coat tails, "In all the history of men, savage and civilized, in the history of nations, ancient and modern, you can find nothing, not even in the annals of the French Revolution, equal to this atrocity and abomination," and he called upon the throng to stand together, "to dig out the roots and pull up the seed of the Rebellion."

And others followed him equally vehement, equally determined. They did not hesitate to charge Lee - Davis, with being the instigators of the crime. "They deserve damnation - political infamy," declared Fessenden, "and as true as we live, we will give it to them now."

This is what Booth had let loose. A week later his dying words were, "Useless! Useless!" Yes, and infinitely worse than useless for the South that he had sought to serve, for he had let loose that spirit of fear and revenge that Abraham Lincoln had spent the last months of his life in a conscious effort to soften and control.

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In all this grief and anger there was something still profounder. It was an awful fear that the government could not stand the strain of the new attack; that after their four tortured years, something was impending more terrible than they had experienced. You find voiced again and again in the speeches and writings of the hour - a sense of impending destruction. It was to that foreboding of evil that Fred Douglas alluded when he said in a speech in Brooklyn on the assassination of Lincoln, "I cannot describe it. You cannot describe it. No man can describe the effect produced. It was as if some great convulsion of Nature had occurred, as if the solid earth had opened and swallowed up one of our chief towns. If the graves had opened beneath our feet and the sheeted dead started from the dust of ages, the consternation and horror could not have been greater."

Henry Ward Beecher voiced something of this idea. The news came to him late, for he was one of a party, including William Lloyd Garrison, Theodore Tilton and many other distinguished anti-slavery workers, that had gone by sea to Charlestown to raise a flag on April 14 over Fort Sumter. The flag raising was a genuine jubilee meeting in Charlestown for forty-eight hours after, undisturbed by the tragedy in Washington. It was not until Monday as the party were embarking for Florida that the news of the assassination reached them. Beecher told the story in a letter published in The Liberator at the time:

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"We had returned to Beaufort, and were on the eve of going upon shore to enjoy a social interview, before setting out for Savannah, when a telegram came to Senator Wilson from Gen. Gillmore. As the boy that brought it passed me, I jocosely asked him some questions about it. Presently Senator Wilson came out of his cabin, much agitated, and said, 'Good God! the President is killed!' and read the dispatch. It was not grief, it was sickness that I felt.

"In one half-hour we had wheeled upon our keel, and were plowing our way back to Hilton Head, whither we had telegraphed to have steam raised upon the Suwo Nada, that we might leave immediately for the North. We could see no more sights. We had no more heart for pleasure. The heavens seemed dark. Nothing was left, for the hour, but God, and his immutable providence, and his decrees. I leaned on them, and was strengthened. But, oh, the sadness of that company, and our nights' and our days' voyaging back! We knew nothing but this: that the President had been assassinated. All the rest was reserved for our coming into the harbor. We hoped to have returned with great cheer, and to have come up this noblest bay of the world to see it lined with tokens of joy and beauty; but, instead of that, on a dreary morning, drenched, chilled, and seasick, we came creeping up the bay under a cloudy sky, fit symbol of our nation's loss, and betook ourselves to our several homes."

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Thus, their first impression was like that of the whole country. T hey, too, saw a universal conspiracy, a danger greater than the Union had yet been subjected to. But once landed and finding that the stability of the government was not in the least affected, that the North was firmer than ever in its determination, the conspiracy the work of one weak hand, there came an immense relief and thanksgiving of which all the members of that party often in later years spoke.

The pitch of fury reached in the Wall Street meeting and other similar gatherings held all through the land, as well as the sense of the foundation of things being shaken, the government tottering, was due in no small degree, as said above, to the belief that the assassination, the attack on Mr. Seward, was but a first step of a conspiracy covering the North, planned and carried out by the Confederate government. Secretary of War Stanton - and for the moment Stanton was Washington - believed this fully and the orders which he as the military head of the government gave were planned on this theory. It was not many days, however, before the tension of the North was broken by proof enough that the terrible thing which had happened was the work of one half-crazed intellect, that no one in authority in the Confederacy knew anything of what he had undertaken. The mad irresponsibility and futility of the act became more and more evident to the country as, with straining eyes it watched the efforts of the government to get hands on the assassin - now a fugitive in direst straits.

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As the Lincoln funeral train moved northward toward New York on the Friday after the assassination, Booth, hidden in a pine thicket, watching for a chance to cross the Potomac into Virginia, his broken leg torturing him almost to desperation, wrote in his pocket diary:

"April 21. After being hunted like a dog through swamps and woods and last night chased by gun boats until I was forced to turn, wet, cold and starving, with every man's hand against me, I am here in despair. And why? For doing what Brutus was honored for, what made Tell a hero."

Three days later, as Lincoln's body came to New York City, Booth was still skulking along the river bank, searching a ferryman. And so it was to the end. While his victim was carried to his last resting place with all the pageantry of which the country was capable, his murderer was hemmed in, hunted through swamps and forests by a great body of the ablest and most trustworthy in the service of the government. Finally on the 25th of April, as Lincoln's body lay in state in New York City, he was to be shot to death in a burning barn where he had taken refuge when the Union soldiers had finally trailed him down and surrounded him.

As the details of the meagreness and meanness of the plot came out, and as there came ample evidence that the Southern government had nothing whatever to do with it, the confidence of the country was restored. And with this restoration there came an amazing new sense - a new resolution of Unionism. If we accept,

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as it seems to me one must who studies closely Abraham Lincoln's life, that the biggest thing in the world to him was the Union, then his death sealed that in a new and conclusive way. He literally gave his life for what was to him the supreme ideal, and the life was not given in vain. Some of the expressions that we have of the sense of a bigger thing than they had ever seen revealed to them are very unusual. It was with all men as with Emerson. The news of the assassination came to him, as he said, "like the shadow of an uncalculated eclipse over the planet. Old as history is and manifold as are its products," he wrote, "I doubt if any death has caused so much pain to mankind as this has caused . . . Every one was struck dumb, and saw at first only deep below, deep as he meditated on the ghastly below. But this first despair was brief. The man was not so to be mourned, he was the most active and hopeful of men and his work had not perished and acclamations of praise for the task he had accomplished burst out in a song of triumph which even tears for his death cannot down."

By the time the body of the murdered President had reached Illinois, the violence of the agitation had passed away, a song of triumph was on the lips of the North. A sense of oneness of purpose had come, too, unlike anything which the War had awakened. But it was a purpose merciless in its spirit. Little chance now for Lincoln's hopes of a peaceful, unrevengeful reconstruction. Only in Illinois, at the moment, did there seem to be no thought of anything but grief. Nor had there been in the long days through

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which they had waited for his return. It was on the night of the 20th of April that the funeral cortege moved out from Washington; it was not until May 1st that it reached Chicago. He had "come home" - so read the banners in more than one town.

This last stage of his journey - from Chicago to Springfield - was moving, personal, in a particular way. It was on May 3rd - 12 days after leaving Washington - that Springfield was finally reached. Here everything that men could do to show grief, to honor the memory of one who was more than a great national leader, who was a neighbor, a friend, had been done. It was noticeable in this last stage of the funeral journey that the motto oftenest quoted on arches, shafts, buildings, under flag draped portraits, was "With malice toward none, with charity to all." One gets the impression from the detailed accounts of the numberless records that it was more nearly the spirit of his own state at that moment than of any other part of the country.

And so they finally laid him away in their lovely Oak Ridge cemetery, where later the country was to rear the memorial which is today the tomb at which more people bow than any other in this or any country, excepting perhaps one in France, that of Napoleon, one at Mt. Vernon, that of Washington. He had found at last that which life had ever denied him - rest and peace. And already the country was shaping an estimate of him which those who follow his footsteps to the end should certainly take into

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account, for it was the estimate of the greatest men of a great period - the men who had criticised and fought him as well as those who had loved and followed him. All now, in a candor which a great experience some times gives even to the most partisan, set down what they thought of him; and it is with something of what the great of this country and of others thought of him at the time of his death that this pilgrimage in Lincoln's footsteps will, in the next article, end.

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