

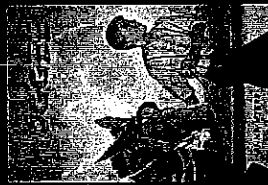
**WOULD YOU RISK YOUR OWN LIFE
TO SAVE THE PRESIDENT?**

Bella isn't *evil*. But even people with good intentions can end up doing bad things. And when John Wilkes Booth—the most charismatic and famous actor of his time—sets his sights on Bella, an assistant seamstress to Mary Todd Lincoln, he is able to persuade her to help with his plot against President Lincoln. Deep down, though, Bella still knows right from wrong and is willing to put her own safety on the line to save the president. But it's too late for Booth to turn back, and he won't let anyone stand in his way—even if it means hurting Bella in the process.

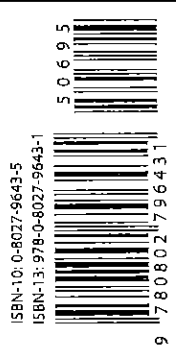
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MYERS

 WALKER

ASSASSIN

Prologue



It is twilight in Richmond, Virginia. The year is 1859. A woman in a lovely green gown walks toward a theater. She holds the hand of her daughter who is eight years old. The little girl has thick black curls and a round sweet face.

A young actor comes from a different direction and reaches the theater door just as the mother and daughter do. He is in the play and should be already behind the curtain where his makeup will be applied. His impulse is to push in front of the woman and child, to open the door and hurry inside. He does not. He is, after all, a gentleman. The makeup can wait. He holds the door for the mother and daughter. His eyes meet the eyes of the girl. They smile at each other, and he thinks what a beautiful child she is.

The young actor is John Wilkes Booth. At twenty he is not really famous, but he will be. Before he is twenty-

five, he will be called the most handsome man in America. He will be the first performer to have his clothing partially torn off by his female fans. Before he is twenty-seven, he will be dead, his name despised. The actor's brother, Edwin, who is also an actor, will never speak his name again, but Edwin will die with his brother's picture beside his bed.

The girl will remember seeing the young actor on the theater steps and in the play. He will not remember her, but she will tell him about their meeting when their paths cross again. He will bring her much pain. Here are their stories.

I

BELLA

HER STORY



I am not evil. I tell this story so that you might understand and perhaps so that I might see more clearly. I was christened Arabella Getchel, but I have always been called Bella. He was the first to say I should be addressed by my full given name. On the lips of John Wilkes Booth, Arabella sounded like a name fit for an angel. I have used his full name as the newspapers do, but I have not forgotten that he liked to leave off John, liked to be called Wilkes. He is dead now, and people everywhere say he was vile. Still, I cannot bring myself to go against his wishes. History will use his full name, but in the rest of my story and in my heart he will be, always, Wilkes.

When I was but little, my mother clothed me in frilly dresses. "You're a beauty, Bella," she would say as she

brushed my thick, dark hair, then tied it with bright ribbons to match my dress. She began very early to tell me that I was made for the stage, and she would take me to the Richmond Theatre often. I did not always understand the play, but I did love the velvet chairs and the applause.

My mother had a small stage built into my schoolroom, and there I would recite nursery rhymes and sing little songs for my mother and my tutor. Sometimes my father would be part of my audience. On those occasions, I tried to stand taller and speak more clearly. "Princess Bella," my father would call as he clapped his hands. Then he would lift me high into the air, and my curls would bounce against my head.

When my mother lay dying from consumption, she called me to her bedside. "The theater, Bella," she whispered through fever-dried lips. "Don't forget the theater. I was never able to be on the stage, but you have the looks of a star." She stroked my hair until someone came and led me away.

My mother met my father in the theater. Mother was only a flower girl, selling her blossoms to gentlemen for their ladies. My father had brought a lady with him. I suppose he did give the rose to her, but when the play was over, he made some excuse to send her home alone in the hansom cab he hired for her. Then my father went back into the theater to find my mother.

Wilkes's father met his mother the same way. That theater was in London, though, and Wilkes's father was

an actor, not the son of a cotton merchant, as was my own father.

Still, I found it extraordinary, when first I heard his story, to think that our parents met the same way. He told the story in the costume shop of Ford's Theatre, where I sat sewing a hem into a coat he would wear that evening. Others were present, the chief mistress of the costume shop, another actor, and the lovely lady who had come into the shop on Wilkes's arm. I did not remark at that time on the fact that my parents had met under exactly the same circumstances. My speaking at all would have been totally inappropriate, for I was only a poor girl who was allowed, occasionally, to sew in exchange for tickets.

My grandmother did not believe in the theater. She thought all actors were drunkards, and all actresses were loose women. Even though I, at fourteen, earned our living by helping the woman who was dressmaker for Mary Todd Lincoln, wife of the president, I was not allowed to spend a cent without my grandmother's permission.

Lest I be unfair to my grandmother, Cora Witherpoon, let me say that she fed and housed me from the time I was eight until I went to work at fourteen. I even owed my job to my grandmother, since she taught me the art of sewing and because she passed her White House position to me when her fingers became too stiff with rheumatism to work.

My father, Samuel Getchel, left me with my grandmother temporarily. Looking back on it now, I realize he

began to forget about me even before my mother was buried. I stood beside him as the casket was lowered into the grave and squeezed his hand for reassurance. He did not squeeze back. He did not pull my body, shaking with sobs, to him. He only stood and stared.

As soon as my mother was in the ground, he loaded me, with only a small valise of my things, into our carriage and drove with me from Richmond to Washington City. "It isn't so far away," he said when I begged not to go. "Around a hundred miles, only a three days' drive."

No doubt we stopped at inns at night, but only after the hour had become very late. I had fallen asleep by then, and though I am sure my father woke me, my memory of that trip is only of the carriage. I did not mind so much by day and spent my time gazing out at the places we passed. But I do not remember what I saw. I remember only the night, the sound of carriage wheels on black road. Our coachman drove. Father sat beside me, but still I felt alone in the darkness.

It was late when we reached Washington City. My father, briefly aware of my presence, roused me from sleep when we crossed the great waters of the Potomac River. "Wake up, Bella," he said. "We are crossing the Potomac. It is an important river."

Eager to engage my father in conversation, I sat up, rubbed my eyes, and stared out at what I could see of the water. "Is this the biggest river in the world?" I asked.

"Oh, no," said my father, and he made a sort of bitter-

sounding laugh. "It is a vital one, however." He leaned around me to peer out the window. "This is the Potomac. It forms the border between our own state of Virginia and Washington City, where men try to make laws that govern people, justly or unjustly."

I did not grasp the meaning of my father's words, but I was hungry for the sound of his voice. "Tell me about the laws, Papa." My eyes were heavy, but I did not close them.

My father sighed. "Not now," he said, "but I fear you will grow to understand them. I daresay even children will comprehend and tremble."

His tone was harsh, and I, unwilling to agitate him more, drew away from him to lean close to the window. I did not go back to sleep. Instead I stared out at the dark city, and soon the coach stopped in front of a small cottage. "Your grandmother lives here," said my father.

As Papa climbed down from the carriage, I thought I finally understood the reason for our journey. We had, I believed, come to visit my grandmother. I remembered then that my mother and I had made the journey maybe three years ago, when I was five. We had stayed in a fine inn, but we had come to visit my grandmother's small cottage. I remembered that she had made a beautiful dress for my favorite doll.

"Wait here for me, Bella," Papa said. In the moonlight, I could see him as he knocked upon the wooden door. I could not see my grandmother when she opened the door. But I heard her scream, and I knew my father

must have told her of my mother's death. Very shortly, he came back to the carriage, took my valise, and helped me down.

Inside the one-room cottage, I looked around. In one corner was an iron stove for cooking. A cupboard stood against the wall near the stove, and a small wooden table with two chairs sat in front of it. There was a fireplace with a rocking chair pulled close, and against one wall I saw a small bed. Papa and I cannot sleep here, I thought.

Then Papa said, "Be a good girl, Bella," and I understood suddenly that he meant to leave me.

"I do not have all of my dolls, Papa," I sobbed when he moved toward the door. "I cannot stay here without all of my dolls."

My handsome father bent his dark head to kiss me on my cheek. "It is only for a brief time, Bella," he said. "I will be back to get you soon."

Again he turned toward the door. His gold ring shone in the lamplight, and I grabbed at his hand in an effort to keep him with me. "How long, Papa?" I asked. "How many days before you come back for me?"

"Soon, my pet," he said. He pulled himself loose from me and went out into the night. I rushed to open the door again, rushed to seize one last glimpse of him; but strangely, the moonlight was gone.

I stood in the doorway of my grandmother's house, straining for sight of him, and I listened to the familiar, lonely sound of the wheels of his carriage. Finally my

grandmother came and shepherded me back into her dark little home. She hardly knew what to do with me. My arrival had been totally unexpected, and she had just been informed of her only child's death.

That first night my grandmother put me into her own narrow bed. I lay there and watched as she pulled her small rocker close to the fire. She rocked and rocked, her body bent slightly forward, her arms wrapped around herself. The rocker made a steady sound against the wooden floor, and that sound mixed with the soft sobs that came from my grandmother's thin body.

I do not remember when or how my grandmother acquired the cot that became my bed. I recall only the despair we both felt. Despite her pain, she provided for me as best she could. Each morning after our breakfast, she would prepare a simple snack for my noon meal. Then she would leave for her job at the White House.

Usually she would say, "I hate to leave you alone all day, child, but we do have to eat, now don't we? And of course I'm expected at the White House to clean and help the dressmaker who comes to make Miss Lane's dresses."

I was interested in pretty dresses. "Who is Miss Lane?" I asked.

"Why, she's President Buchanan's niece. She runs all the balls and such, him having no wife. You can see plain that I have to go, can't you, child?"

I would nod my head. In truth, it was no matter to me whether my grandmother went or stayed. I was just as

lonely with her in the room as I was by myself. As soon as she was gone, I would open the door, settle myself on the threshold, and with my one doll in my arms, watch and wait for my papa's return.

It was early spring when first I came to Washington City, but I did not notice how the grass turned green or how the leaves came again to the trees. My grandmother warned me each day, "You must not leave the house, Bella. You could be lost and never find your way back home."

From my waiting spot I could see two cherry trees with white and pink blossoms, and I remembered the story my tutor had told me about George Washington chopping one down. I knew the big river my father had talked about the night he delivered me to this house could not be far away. I should have liked to see the river in the light of day, but I did not consider going out. It was not my grandmother's warning that kept me from straying. Rather it was the terrible fear that my papa might come while I was gone, find me absent, and leave, never to return.

The scene from my doorway changed. Cherries came to replace the blossoms. I watched as they were picked. I watched as leaves on the trees turned yellow, red, or brown. My father did not return.

Finally there came a letter from my aunt Ruth, Papa's sister. My grandmother settled herself at the small table, and I took the chair across from her. It was not a thick letter. I held my breath as my grandmother used a knife to slit the envelope, for it was addressed to her, not to me.

Her eyes moved quickly down the sheet. Then she looked up at me. "Your father will not be coming for you, Bella," she said flatly. "It seems he has taken to drink and card games. Your aunt says your grandfather's business is in ruin, that your father sleeps all day and will see no one."

Not a word came from my mouth. Nor did I cry. I swallowed back the tears that might have come, and I looked about me. So this was to be my life. I was to live here in this one room with this woman who showed me no warmth. It was as if my grandmother read my thoughts.

She pushed back her chair, moved around the table, and pulled me into her arms. "Don't fret, child," she said, and she swayed her body to rock me in her arms. "Granny will teach you to sew, and she will make you a new dress." She kissed the top of my head. "It's not so bad, little Bella. We have each other now, and I am glad that he won't be coming back to take you away from me."

Even my childish mind could understand the situation. Thinking my father would come back to claim me, my grandmother had been reluctant to love me and face another loss. After that day, my life changed.

dimness stunned my eyes, but I saw that the street was full of soldiers. Two units of city militia were lined up, waiting to board trains to Charleston. They were going to join hundreds who would stand guard at the hanging of John Brown.

In October the old man had led eighteen men in an attempt to take over the state arsenal at Harper's Ferry . . . abolitionist fool. His plan was to steal guns, run for the mountains, and wait there to be joined by slaves. He believed they would come to him, come running, those darkies.

He killed some soldiers and took a few men prisoner. Some of Brown's men died too, and he was captured. Such men always are. I wonder if old Brown knew that, knew that he was bound to die. Many simpletons in the North thought he should have been forgiven because he was insane, and there was also talk that some sympathizers might try to save him.

Hence the street in front of my theater was filled with militia. Suddenly I was struck with an idea. Why not join them? Why not be part of the men who stood for what I, too, believed? Death to those who try to change things in the South! Death to those who hate slavery!

"Wait," I called to them, and a group of five or so men stopped to look at me. "I'd like to join you for a bit."

One of them was younger than the others, but he was the one who spoke first. He peered hard into my face. "Aren't you that actor fellow, Booth?"

2

WILKES

HIS STORY



The girl remembered me, seeing me on the steps and on the stage. Ah, fair Arabella, I regret what happened to you. Truly I do, but I want the world to know that I could not have spared you. No, no, I couldn't. You were part of a plan, a plan much larger, much more important than a little girl, no matter how sweet.

Looking back, I think perhaps in some way the plan began there in 1859, the year Arabella saw me on the Richmond stage, the year of John Brown's uprising.

Yes, they said old Brown was crazy, and perhaps he was. Still, he was brave. I remember the day, November 24, 1859. The war had not yet begun on that sweet November morning, but there were movements in that direction. I came out the door of the theater. The bright light after the

I smiled at him. "I am that same fellow," I say, "but I've a notion to join your noble band for a time if you could get me a uniform."

"Who would do your part in the show?" He pointed with his gun toward the show card with my name posted outside the theater.

"I don't know." I laughed. "Nor do I care if I can but be one of you, and I would gladly pay for a uniform."

One of the older ones spoke more to his fellow soldier than to me. "We could get one off the sarge, I'd wager."

The young one nodded his head. "Yes," he said to me. "Will it be blue or gray for you?"

I did not hesitate. Had I not worn the gray uniform in school? "Gray," I said with a thrill. "It is always gray for me."

Strange how those words ring in my ears and rest now in my heart, Gray, gray for me. We traveled to Charleston, a fine city, ruined later because it became the capital of West Virginia, that traitorous state that broke away from the true Virginia when it nobly seceded from the union. How could the people there choose so? How could they desire to stay part of a country run by a man such as Lincoln?

But not knowing what lay ahead for the area, I found it pleasurable. We camped outside the city for eight nights. I lived there with the soldiers and was truly one of them. At night we gathered about the fire, comrades all. We sang "Old Dan Tucker," and other good old camp

songs. Then a soldier with a beautiful tenor voice sang "Danny Boy," a song about a father whose son is leaving home. The haunting melody made me think of my own father.

"My beautiful boy," my father used to call me. He was a man who did not live by rules made by other people. He left his first wife and son in England, brought my mother to America, and had ten children with her. My parents were finally married on my thirteenth birthday, two years before my father's death. As I listened to the song, I thought that I, like my father, must make my own rules for life. "You are a Booth, boy," he often told me.

When the song was over, they began to call for me. "Booth, Booth," they chanted, and of course I did not disappoint them. I stood and did readings for them, playing Henry from *Henry III*, Brutus from *Julius Caesar*, and Lear from *King Lear*. Ah, how they applauded, the sweetest applause, perhaps of my career . . . and cheers too. They cheered me for wanting to be one of them.

A newspaperman recognized me and wrote about me, saying I was not a member of their group, but that when I heard their drum roll, I felt compelled to join. It is true! I did have the feeling that I must be one of them, must express my loyalty to the South.

On the morning of December 2, we lined up around the scaffold. It was a brisk day, but not over cold for the time of year. There must have been well over a thousand

of us uniformed men there. No civilians were allowed to watch, for fear of trouble, and I felt fortunate to be an observer.

John Brown was escorted from the jail to the wagon by a man named Avis who had been his keeper for seven weeks. Avis, they say, had grown to like Brown, and the old man gave the jailer his silver watch in appreciation of the kind care he had received. He also gave him a note all about how it would take blood to wash away the crime of slavery. Poor old soul, he really believed slavery was wrong. Did he not see that the colored man was better off as a slave, that this country was made for the white man?

We could see him come riding up to the field outside of town where the gallows had been prepared. He sat on a long wooden box, his coffin, and jumped from the wagon with more ease than would be expected from one of almost sixty years.

From the gallows he must have had a pleasant view of broad fields with cornstalks and white farmhouses, seen through the leafless trees of winter. Suddenly I felt my eyes fill with tears. I was only a few feet away. How his heart must have broken when his tired old eyes saw that no one had come to rescue him.

They put a white linen hood over his head, and I felt sympathy for him rush through my blood. Not sympathy for his vile desire to free the slaves, not disregard for the

five lives lost on his account, but compassionate regard for the old man himself. He was brave, brave indeed . . . knowing that what he did might result in his own death, but caring for nothing save the advancement of the cause he believed in, however terribly mistaken.

I could see him stiffen just before the fall, but he did not cry out. Then his body was hanging there in the Virginia breeze. A colonel shouted, "So perish all such enemies of Virginia! All such enemies of the Union! All such foes of the human race!"

Hearing his words, I wondered. Did he not know that enemies of Virginia and enemies of the Union could not be the same, not for long anyway? Did he not know that old Brown was right about the blood, but wrong in thinking it would be only the blood of Southerners? Did the colonel not realize we were on the edge of war?

When I was about to leave with the soldiers, an officer who had been a hostage of Brown's at the arsenal came to speak to me. Because he had been among my father's many fans and appreciated my desire to join the troops, he gave me the spear old Brown had carried. On the handle was written, "Major Lewis Washington to J. Wilkes Booth." It became one of my most treasured possessions.

I went back to Richmond with the soldiers, and they were with me when I learned that I had been dismissed by

the theater manager for leaving without word. Several of my fellow soldiers prevailed upon the man to change his mind, and he did so.

Yes, I think that seeing old John Brown being brave enough to strike against that which he hated may well have been the beginning of my plan to strike against the tyrant called Abraham Lincoln.

3

BELLA

HER STORY



I would no longer spend my days alone. "We must get you to a school," my grandmother said after my aunt's letter arrived. Just two days later she came home with news of a school run by Mistress Newby, a kind Quaker lady who would let me attend in exchange for the sewing Grandmother would do for her family.

I was excited as we walked to the school. There had been little chance for me to see much of Washington City, and I enjoyed looking about. Compared to Richmond, where I had always lived, Washington City seemed to have an almost unfinished feel about it. One street, I learned later, had a paved surface, but mostly they were dusty or muddy, depending on the weather.

The street Grandmother and I walked down had a

board sidewalk for a time, but then the boards ended, and we had to walk in mud. "Hold up your skirts," my grandmother called.

Having been taught only at home, I had never been in a school. I imagined a large brick building with children playing games in the yard. My grandmother turned down an alley and stopped in front of a low building made of white clapboard. There was not even a sign.

"Is this the school?" I looked about for a larger building, but Grandmother knocked at the door.

The teacher came, and as she and my grandmother spoke, I leaned around her, trying to see if there were indeed other children inside. "I'll show thee to a desk," said Mistress Newby, and I followed her inside.

Boys sat on one side, girls on the other. On each side of the room, four pieces of lumber made narrow desks, and students sat behind them. There was room for three students at each desk. One spot on the girl's side was empty, and I knew that I would sit there.

I walked beside the teacher to the desk she had chosen for me. It was before I took my place that I first saw Steven Browning. He sat, of course, on the boys' side. I looked up to see blue eyes staring at me from across the aisle. I do not recall anything about the girl I sat beside that first day, but were I to close my eyes now, I could picture Steven exactly as he was, hunched over his book, but gazing in my direction.

For a moment, I was aware only of those penetrating,

icy eyes. The ice melted, however, when he smiled. I was too shy to smile back at him. Instead I looked down and ran my hand over the wooden desk in front of me.

"You will be shown how to walk to the White House when your schooling is over, Bella," Grandmother had said just before she left me. I had been too interested in seeing the inside of the school to ask who would be my guide.

"Steven Browning's mother serves with your grandmother, and he will walk with thee, Bella Getchel."

Dear, gentle, Mistress Newby, with her gray hair, soft voice, and simple dress. She treated me with special tenderness, due, I believe, to my shyness and my being away from my home. There was always an extra pat for my shoulder, an extra smile when I recited. I cannot bear to imagine how great would be the distress to that teacher of my childhood were she ever to learn what path my feet would travel when I was ten and four.

But that day when I was but eight I knew nothing of the future as I walked beside Steven on the dirt road that led us to the north door of the White House. He was the perfect companion for a shy child. I had already observed on that first day in our small schoolroom that the boy loved to talk. Often Mistress Newby would stop a lesson, look at Steven, shake her head slightly, and lay her finger to her lips.

I always shot a quick glance at the boy across the aisle. Steven would look down, sorry for his actions, but shortly

he would forget. Head up and full of enthusiasm, he would make some comment to one of the boys.

As soon as I learned Steven was to be my guide, I knew I would not need to speak much. "Just come with me," he announced when we were outside. "The real name is the Executive Mansion, but everyone calls it the White House. I live there, you know, with my ma up on the third floor where the live-in servants stay."

I did not know, and I stared at him, amazed. This boy lived in the very same house as the president my grandmother spoke of with such respect. We walked quickly for a few steps, but before we were out of the alley, he stopped. His hand was on his hip. "My ma says you come from Richmond," he said. "That so?"

I nodded. "Well," he said, "I'll not hold that against you." I suppose my face must have registered some surprise, because he went on to explain. "I mean, I reckon you are one of them Southerners. You have any slaves in your house?"

I nodded again.

"Well, I'd not be telling folks that," he said. "We don't see as how that is right."

I nodded, totally unaware as to why on earth anyone should object to the fact that George and Sally served my father's house.

Steven began to walk, and I stayed up with him. He bent to pick up a small stone from the road. He examined it

closely, then slipped it into the pocket of his pants. "I collect things," he said. Then his eyes returned once more to me. "How old are you?" he asked.

"Eight."

"I'm nine," he said. We stood still for a moment, looking at each other, taking one another's measure. I stood considerably taller than Steven. "Ma says I'll grow. She says my brother Joseph was short like me too till he hit about twelve." We were at a corner, and he turned to lead me down the edge of a wide road with many carriages. There was no sidewalk, not even a board one. Steven stepped around me to be the one closer to the road. "My ma says a gentleman is supposed to walk nearest the street," he said, "on account of you might get splattered by mud or run over by a runaway horse."

I leaned around him, looking for runaway horses. I wondered if they were common sights in Washington City, but I said nothing.

Steven noticed. "You don't talk much, do you?"

He did not wait for an answer, just smiled and continued. "That's all right. Mistress Newby says I talk enough for six people." He paused for just a moment, then went on. "I like you. You're right pretty. You are the prettiest friend I got. But then it is not so awful hard to be prettier than Jeb Wilson." He laughed at his own joke.

I smiled at him. I liked being called pretty, and I especially liked being called friend. That's what we were from

that day on, friends. I look back on many things with a sorrowful heart. Perhaps the most sorrowful of all is how I betrayed Steven.

He led me that day into the White House. It rose high amidst the buildings around it, and we walked across a large area of grass and trees to reach the door. The man outside the door smiled at us. "She's with me," Steven said, and the man opened the door.

"It's mighty big," he said, "but I know my way around. We could go to the servants' quarters, but I reckon it's all right for you to go to Mr. Buchanan's library with me. That's where I usually go after school. He allows me to read his books. You'll have to be quiet." He laughed. "Reckon that's no problem for you. Likely you won't believe it until we're in there, but I'm quiet in the president's library."

I had thought my Richmond home to be large, but I had never been in a place so big as this house where the mighty president lived. It matched how I had pictured the giant's palace when my mother used to tell me the story of Jack and the Beanstalk. I half expected to see a giant on the great stairs.

I wanted to move slowly, to look all about me at the bright glass chandeliers, the deep dark shine of the wooden furniture, the fresh flowers that rested on almost every table, but Steven was in a hurry, and I did not want to be left behind.

He started up the wide, red-carpeted stairs. "I like the

library most of all." He stopped for a moment about halfway up and looked me full in the face. "I hope you won't mind me telling you right out, but the truth is I'm exceptional smart."

I nodded, and he went on. "Mr. Buchanan said as much to my ma. He said something else that is a marvel. He said I'm to go to college, said he would pay for it every penny. All I have to do is mind my studies." He smiled broadly. "See, this is the way of it. My pa used to work for Mr. Buchanan when he lived back in Pennsylvania, before he got elected to run the country. We all came with him here to Washington City, but my pa died. Now Ma works helping to keep things clean. Ma likes things clean, and I like reading books, so it all falls out pretty well. Joseph, my tall brother, he went back to Pennsylvania on account of he is sweet on a girl there. Say, do you know the name of that street out in front?" He pointed. "The one that is paved is Pennsylvania Avenue. Isn't that grand? Of course, you being from Virginia might not think so."

"Oh, yes," I said quickly. "I like Pennsylvania." I had never before heard of Pennsylvania, but I could tell by Steven's face that he loved the place. I wondered if he missed his home there as sorely as I missed mine. I longed for the flowers that grew in our garden, for the smells of a lavish dinner spread on the table, for my mother's kiss. Steven's father was dead, as was my mother, but there was no time to think about that. Steven had started up the stairs again, and I hurried after him.

We were well down the hall when suddenly Steven put out his arm to move me back against the velvety wallpaper. "The president is coming," he whispered from his spot beside me. I looked up to see two men approaching.

"Which one?" I whispered, but Steven pressed his finger to his lips to show we should not talk.

"Yes, John," said the taller man, "I feel certain we must be unruffled. We do not want to anger the South more. Things will settle down if we remain calm."

"I hope so, Mr. President. I do hope so."

I stared into the face of the man who was the president. I hoped he would not object to my presence in his home. When they were near us, the taller man looked in our direction and nodded his head in greeting. "Hello, children," he said.

"Hello, sir," said Steven. The men walked on, but we did not move until they had disappeared down the stairs.

"That was him." Steven's voice was soft. "He runs the total, entire country of the United States of America, but he stops to speak to the likes of you and me, who are the children of his servants. He is a true, great man."

I nodded. "Do you know what they were talking about?" he asked.

I did not, and I shook my head. "Don't you know that the folks in the South are down on the folks in the North on account of us not wanting them to have slaves?" I shook my head again. "They say they can have slaves if they want to, and they don't see it to be any business of the rest of us."

"Is it?" I asked.

Steven stared at me, his face shocked. "Let me tell you, Bella. It is almighty wrong for folks to own other folks, no matter their skin color. You just ask Mistress Newby in school. She will tell you how the cow ate the cabbage."

I did not see what cows and cabbage had to do with anything, but suddenly I did remember my father's words about the laws made in Washington. "I don't think my papa likes the laws that get made in this city," I said.

Steven made a small sound of disgust. "Your father is a Southerner," he said. "Southerners are pretty much all bad eggs."

He had gone too far now. Friend or not, I was offended. I folded my arms across my chest and stood absolutely still. "If my father is a Southerner, then I am too. I don't think it is very nice for you to say we are bad eggs."

A look of surprise crossed Steven's face. "I wasn't intending to be unkind," he said. "I just had a notion that I ought to tell the truth. Mistress Newby says being kind is just as needful as being honest." He frowned. "I reckon it's hard to be both. I'm real sorry."

In my full memory there is no other instance when I felt that Steven Browning was unkind to me. He was sometimes stubborn, sometimes prideful, but never unkind. For two years, we studied together in the small alleyway building that was Mistress Newby's school.

When Steven was eleven, our teacher told his mother there was nothing more she could teach him. President

Buchanan had left the White House by then, but an educational trust had been set up for the boy. My friend was sent to a boys' academy, where he learned Latin and studied the classics.

My schooling ended the same year Steven left. From Mistress Newby, I did, indeed, learn to hate the idea of slavery. "Thee has a good mind, Bella," she told me once when we were discussing the growing unrest over slavery. "I can tell thee what I believe to be the truth, but thee must decide what is the truth for thee and not be swayed by the opinions of others."

Oh, if only I had learned that lesson from my dear teacher. If only I had truly learned to stand against the influence of others.

True to his prediction, Steven did grow, but it happened before he was twelve. Sometime during that last year that we studied together I began to notice that he was taller than I as we walked side by side to the White House. I don't remember when exactly it was, but at some point I noticed too that his face had grown to match his eyes. They were still large eyes, but their size no longer seemed to dominate his entire being.

During those happy school days, I came to think less and less of Virginia. I began to feel Washington City to be my home. My father, it seems, was able to pull himself together and go back into business. He even remarried. He wrote to me occasionally, always with a promise to visit soon.

For a few days after each letter, I would miss my father, and I would try to believe he would truly come to see me. Believing, though, became harder and harder.

During that first year my grandmother began to teach me to sew. "You have a gift, Bella," she said. I sat beside her, and I remember how I grew warm with the pleasure of her praise. "I declare I've never seen another body learn as you are doing. Why, I believe you might become a great dressmaker, far surpass your old grandmother and be a mantua maker."

I bit at my lip and did not lift my eyes to my grandmother's face. I had no desire to learn to make the dresses called mantuas. The bodice of the dresses fit tightly with pleats in the back that ran all the way into the waist. They had great full skirts that draped over large hoops. A room could be filled quickly by fashionable ladies wearing mantuas. I had no desire to spend my life making dresses for rich women who would fuss constantly about the fit of their dresses and believe they should not be seen twice in the same garment.

I dreamed only of the theater, but I had learned early on that my grandmother would allow no discussion of such an ambition. "That's nonsense," she said. I had been with my grandmother several months before I confided my ambition to her as we ate our supper of cheese and bread. "It's a sinful place. I never encouraged your mother in such foolish thoughts, and I won't encourage you." She cut a slice of cheese and handed it to me. "Besides, you're

shy, child. Do you imagine you would enjoy standing on a stage talking to a crowd of people?"

I shrugged my shoulders and put the food into my mouth. I did imagine that I would enjoy it. I would not be speaking as Bella Getchel, a timid, tongue-tied girl. I would speak as a queen or a princess. On the stage I would be able to step out of myself and lead many interesting lives.

Looking back, I find it ironic indeed that it was my grandmother's instruction in sewing that allowed me access to the theater. Can I be sorry that ever I set foot in Ford's Theatre? Perhaps I should, but alas I cannot.

A

WILKES

HIS STORY



It is true! I cannot believe it, but Abraham Lincoln has been elected president of the United States! There is no recourse now for the South. We cannot stay in the Union, cannot be led by such a man.

What will be my part in helping to build the new nation that must be formed in the South? War will surely come now. I have promised my mother I will not fight in a war, and she worries about the war dividing the family.

I let people believe that I was in on the capture of John Brown, have described the events so well that at times I myself believe that I was there. Well, I was there in spirit. I was there when they hanged the man. What harm can come by adding to the story? My soul is too large to have limitation set upon it.

I want fame, but do I want to be known only as a famous actor? My father was famous, but he was also a great man, loved by many. He died when I was fifteen.

My father died during the winter, so we were at our Baltimore home instead of in the country when the news came. He died while touring, and my mother traveled to Cincinnati to claim his body. When she returned, she had the walls draped with white fabric to cover pictures and mirrors.

The only decoration in the room where my father's body rested was a bust of Shakespeare, which seemed to look down upon him. I am certain Shakespeare would look favorably on the man who brought so many of his characters to life on the stage.

Great numbers of people came to pay their respects. Some of them were rich and important. Some were not. "Your father had a good heart," one shabbily dressed man told me. He leaned against my father's casket. "You see how it is, me a deliveryman, your father a great stage star, but we was friends. He always had an apple for my horse, carried apples on him to give to horses on the street, and he always told us drivers to be kind to the horses." He wiped his eyes.

Are sons not supposed to move beyond what their fathers have achieved? I cannot stop feeling that I must be greater than my father.

After Father's death, we had little money. He had made no provision for us in case of his death. I suppose

Junius Brutus Booth thought he would live forever. I think perhaps I believed he would also. I remember the strangeness of looking down at his dead form, trying to believe he would never speak again.

My older brothers, June and Edwin, were in California when Father died, and my mother told them not to worry about coming home. My younger brother, Joseph, was allowed to stay in school. We rented out our Baltimore home. Mother, Rosalie, Asia, and I moved back to the farm, and for a few years I tried to farm.

In some ways those years on the farm were good. Rosalie always stayed inside with Mother, but Asia and I passed many happy hours in the fields and woods. I loved riding my pony Cola through the countryside. Always, though, I was restless, longing for something I could not name. I remember going to Asia one day as she lay reading on a blanket spread beneath a large oak tree.

I leaned down to take her book from her. "Let us be happy," I said. "Life is too short to be spent moping."

Asia sat up and crossed her arms. "John Wilkes Booth," she said to me. "I am happy. It is you who needs to heed his own advice. What is it that troubles you so?"

I thought then, when I was young and struggling to make a life as a farmer, that it was the stage for which I longed. I believed that I would find contentment in the applause of adoring fans. I have not done so.

In the fall of 1860, I was in Montgomery, Alabama, playing to fans who loved me. I remember the parties

most. I was the guest of honor in many a fine home. We were at dinner during one of those parties when the hostess turned to me and said. "We have just bought a fine new racehorse, Mr. Booth, paid dearly for him, I can tell you."

She was a pretty woman dressed in a gown of black and white, her fair hair piled high on her head. Her blue eyes danced as she spoke. "You enjoy racing, I assume," I said.

"Oh my, yes, Forrest and I both do, but we shall enjoy it more with this wonderful horse."

Her husband, Forrest, at the other end of the table, entered the conversation. "Tell Mr. Booth what you want to name the horse, my dear."

The lady laughed. She bent her head in pretended embarrassment. Then glancing up at me, her gaze coquettish, she said, "I'd like to name him John Wilkes if you've no objection. He is a handsome animal and fine. I am sure the mares adore him."

I laughed. "I would be honored, my lady," I said, and I lifted my glass for a toast. "To John Wilkes, may he race always to the front."

After the meal, I walked about the plantation with my host and hostess. The late afternoon sun was still warm. We toured the barn to see the horses, and we walked along beside the fields that lay beyond the barn.

"What a lovely scene," I said, gesturing toward the fields where the slaves bent over cotton. They sang as

they worked, and their voices carried to our ears. I remember thinking that it was a picture in danger of disappearing.

Only a few weeks after that party, Abraham Lincoln was elected president of the United States. In a four-way race, he won only 39 percent of the popular vote, but was elected by a wide electoral majority. I was backstage when a fellow actor showed me the *Montgomery Advertiser*. Staring down at the headlines that announced the election, I felt tears roll down my cheeks.

The newspaper recommended that Alabama secede, and all about me voices echoed the sentiment. When I left Alabama shortly after the election, I knew I would not again come to the dear state as part of the Union.

I went from Alabama to a theater in Philadelphia. Although I played to appreciative fans, I did not find the people there as warm as the people of the South. My sister Asia had married a man we had known from childhood, John Clarke Sleeper. He was beginning to do well on the stage as a sort of low comedy actor, and he reversed his middle and last names, thinking it would not be good to be known as a Sleeper.

Asia looked beautiful on her wedding day, and I tried to be glad for her, but I had never really cared for the groom. I did love Asia's babies. She had two by the time I visited her in her Philadelphia home. She sat on a love seat, smiling, as I rolled with the babies on the floor. How I loved those sweet boys, loved to kiss their soft sweet

skin and feel their small hands clutching at my cheek. Asia was with child again, and I remember looking up at her and saying, "You might want to name the next child after your younger brother."

"You think I should name the next child Joseph, do you?" Asia laughed, but she knew that I meant myself. Even then, though, I doubted her husband would agree to have his son named for me.

John Clarke had a small mind. Therefore I should not have been surprised to learn that he was a Lincoln supporter. On that first visit to their home after the election, I simply avoided discussing politics with the man. A few weeks later the peace was impossible to keep.

I was at dinner with Asia and John when a neighbor came breathlessly into the dining room shouting, "South Carolina has seceded. The Union has been destroyed."

"It was bound to happen," said John. "Others will follow, and they won't go peacefully." He shook his thick head. "The fools will push us to war now."

Without even planning my actions, I sprang to my feet and put my hands around his neck, wanting with all my heart to squeeze.

"Wilkes," Asia yelled, and she jumped to push at my body.

I came to myself, dropped my hands, and muttered an apology. Asia glared at me, and I could not bear to have her angry with me. "I am truly sorry, old man," I said to the idiot Clarke. "I suffered a moment of near insanity, I

suppose. . . ." I looked down at the plate full of food in front of me. "Ever since fighting to capture old John Brown, I've been a bit unstable on the subject of the South."

Asia smiled at me sweetly and put her hand across the table to pat mine. "You should never have gotten involved in a battle, Wilkes," she said. "Your spirit is too fine, too fragile, for such things." She turned then to look at her husband. "We won't let political arguments divide us from family, will we, John?"

Clarke made a halfhearted attempt to agree with her, but I knew that day that the lines were drawn. The man who had never really been my friend was now my enemy.

Shortly after South Carolina left the Union, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, and Georgia followed. I waited almost with my breath held for Virginia to make her move. I believed that my home state of Maryland would do whatever Virginia did.

an abolitionist and would do away with slavery. It was a known fact that because there was no Republican Party in the South, he did not get a single vote in eleven slave states.

"Imagine that," I said to Steven. "We are to have a president that not one person in eleven of these United States of America voted for."

It was a few days before the inauguration, and we were seated on a bench in the back garden of the White House. Steven broke a twig he had been holding in his hand and shrugged. "Oh, well," he said. "We aren't even united now, not with seven states seceded. More of those hotheads are bound to go."

I wished I had not brought it up. Generally, I agreed with Steven's ideas about politics. It was natural that I should. I spent my afternoons with him in the most political home in America, and Steven was always ready to explain his ideas to me. Still, I could not but feel a certain discomfort when people spoke disparagingly of the South. I had only lived in Washington City for two years. Was I not, I wondered, being disloyal to my father, and even to my mother's memory, to listen to the South being criticized?

Steven knew me well by this time, and so observant was he of my every expression that I could never hide a feeling from him. "Oh, don't be glum, Bella. I know you can't take all love for the South out of you." He laughed and pulled at one of my braids. "Likely, I wouldn't much

5

BELLA

HER STORY



November 6, 1860, was a sad day for Steven and me, and, I think I can say, for the employees at the White House. On that day Mr. Abraham Lincoln was elected president. Our beloved Mr. Buchanan had not even run for reelection, but still we felt somehow that Lincoln would be pushing our president out. Soon there would be strangers living on the second floor, not friendly Mr. Buchanan and his sweet niece Miss Lane.

Oh, we had heard a plenty about the new president and his family, heard that he was ugly, uneducated, inexperienced, and downright vulgar in manner. We had also heard that Mrs. Lincoln was a sour woman, given to bad tempers and fits of depression. Talk was that most Northerners only voted for him because he was

want you for a friend if you could forget your home so easy."

Even though we knew we wouldn't like the Lincolns much, we were still excited when Inaugural Day, March 4, came. My grandmother and Steven's mother were busy in the White House that day, but he and I planned to take in the ceremony.

We stationed ourselves early along Pennsylvania Avenue to see the two presidents ride by. The crowd was already thick, but we found an empty spot and waited. The March air was sharp. I had dressed warmly in heavy stockings, a long wool skirt, and a thick shawl over my blouse.

A lady who stood beside us complained to her husband of being cold. "Why you want to see him is beyond me," she complained. "They say he is downright homely."

"I mean to see the man," said her husband, and he took off his coat and put it over his wife's shoulders. "We come all the way here to see him. He's got a terrible job ahead of him, and I want to see his face, homely or no."

There were armed soldiers all along the street, and even more uniformed men with rifles perched in the high windows of buildings. I felt uneasy seeing all the guns and said so.

"How do you suppose Lincoln feels?" Steven said. "There have been all kinds of threats to kill him, you know. There are seven states out of the union already."

Finally, not long before noon, we caught sight of them

coming, first soldiers on horseback and then the carriage, open so everyone could see. They sat side by side. We had always thought of Mr. Buchanan as tall, but Lincoln towered over him. Steven pulled a piece of paper and a pencil from his trouser pocket.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I want to write down things, some of what he says and all," he told me.

"Why?"

"So I can study on it tonight, of course." Steven was too kind to add, "Don't you ever want things to think about at night?" I knew, though, that my mind, so simple compared to his, must seem a mystery to him.

"How tall do you suppose he is?" Steven asked.

I shrugged. "Real tall."

Steven scribbled, "How tall?" on his paper and stuck it back in his pocket. "If we want to hear anything, we'd better hurry," he said then, and we began to move quickly down the street. After a few minutes Steven decided we should run. I knew my grandmother would say it was not ladylike to run on a public street, but run we did, along the edge of the street, through puddles, through crowds of people, and through groups of soldiers.

I almost collided with a pig being chased by a boy, and Steven did run right into a small man who sold hot cider from a pushcart. The man tottered backward, but Steven grabbed him. "Excuse me, sir," he said.

Nothing was broken or spilled, but the man shouted,

"Ruffian!" and I looked back to see him shake his fist in our direction.

We could see the Capitol a long way before we got there. It sat on a hill, a huge white building that seemed to rise almost up into the clouds. Workmen's scaffolds stood all about it because they were replacing the old dome with a much higher one made of cast iron. We caught sight of the rough seats that had been set up by placing lumber on barrels, but they were filled. Crowds of people stood behind the seating area.

We stopped at the back of the crowd, but Steven was not satisfied. "We won't hear a thing from back here," he said. "We are going to have to work at getting up front." He took my hand and pulled me after him. More than once, I saw him use his shoulder to force people to move far enough apart for us to slide between them. One man removed his tall hat and swatted at us with it, but we pushed on, reaching the front just before the new president was sworn into office from his place on top of the Capitol steps. We stood at the end of the third row of seats.

"The other fellow is Chief Justice Taney," Steven whispered.

"Who is he?" I asked.

Steven frowned. "You know, from the Supreme Court." He had his paper and pencil ready.

I did not know what the Supreme Court was, but I could tell from the frown that Steven did not want any more questions. Mr. Taney gave the oath to the new pres-

ident. Both men held up their right hands. "I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States," Mr. Lincoln repeated. We were close, near enough to see the deep lines in his face. His bones were big and seemed to stick out almost through his skin. His eyes were sad, very sad, and kind. He was not ugly, not really, I decided.

He talked about how he did not intend to interfere with the institution of slavery in the states where it already existed. That, it seemed to me, was friendly toward the South. I thought those words should make the people in the South feel better, but he went on to say that the Constitution did not give states the right to secede from the Union, and that he would protect property and places belonging to the federal government.

I knew there had been trouble in some of the states that had seceded over who the forts and arsenals belonged to, the state or the Union. Toward the end he said there would be no conflict unless the seceded states started it.

When it was over, Steven wrote, "I like Mr. Lincoln," on his paper. He showed me the sentence, and I nodded my agreement.

We took our time walking back down Pennsylvania Avenue to the spot where we would take different directions. Grandmother had told me to stay away from the White House for a few days at least. Steven was to stay out

of sight in the quarters he shared with his mother. "We'll have to see how things turn out around here," Steven's mother had warned. "You youngsters are good to stay out of the way and all, but still, we'd better wait and see."

School was not in session for the first few days after the inauguration. I waited at home each evening for the bits of White House news my grandmother brought home. The Lincolns were a change for the household staff, a busy, loud family in contrast to the quiet Buchanans. "Those boys!" My grandmother shook her head after the second day. "I doubt they've ever been told to be quiet."

I looked up from the stitches on my sampler. I was very interested in Lincoln's sons. Robert, seventeen, was away at school. Willie, ten years old, was just my age. The younger one, Tad, was eight. "Have you seen them?" I asked.

"Seen them? They're everywhere, sliding down the banister on the front stairs, sitting on the floor, and leaning against their father's knee while he talks to government men."

I went back to my sampler. As I worked on the embroidery stitches, Arabella Getchel, age ten years, 1861, I thought about Mr. Lincoln, a man who liked having his children with him even when he was busy trying to run a whole country. I wondered if I would ever see my own father again.

The next day my grandmother came home with big news to share. I had peeled potatoes for supper, and

she began to slice them into a pan on the stove for cooking.

"Mrs. Lincoln has hired a Negro woman as her chief dressmaker. Isn't that something? Folks whisper that Mrs. Lincoln feels so comfortable with slaves because she had them when she was growing up in Kentucky."

I stopped laying the table with plates and forks. "But this woman can't be a slave, can she?"

"Oh, mercy no, not in the White House. She'll be paid all right, a pretty penny, I would imagine. Elizabeth Keckley is her name, and they say she can make mantuas that can't be matched by anyone else in this city." Grandmother reached for a lid to put on her pot of potatoes. "I have a hope to learn from her, so as to teach you."

I never wanted to discuss my grandmother's plans to train me to become a mantua maker. "Are you angry, Grandmother?" I asked. "I mean, about being a helper to a colored woman?"

My grandmother did not pause in her work. "And why should I be angry? Me with so much to learn from the woman."

After a couple of weeks, my grandmother said it would be all right for me to come to the White House after school. Steven and I spent most of our time in the back garden or the kitchen, ready to help with some slight chore. We were there on April 12, the day war began.

We had heard at school about how the fort off the coast of South Carolina had been attacked by Southern

troops. A man had come into our little building. He held his felt hat in his hand. Looking up, Mistress Newby had said, "It's my husband. Will thee please sit quietly, children?"

She moved quickly to the back of the room. We children stole furtive glances at the two as they stood with heads bent close. Our teacher's husband had not come to school before, and we knew something important must be the subject of their whispers. When the conversation was over, Mr. Newby stayed at the back, but our teacher, white-faced, made her way to the front of the room.

"A battle has begun, dear students," she said, and holding to the edge of her desk for support, she explained about Fort Sumter. "I fear we shall soon be at war. Go home." She closed her eyes for a moment. "Thee should go home and pray. Pray that this terrible conflict might somehow yet be averted." We made no movement. "Go," she said. "Go now."

Steven and I looked at each other. As we filed toward the door, even the very small children were quiet. I looked back just before going out. Mr. Newby had joined his wife, and both were on their knees beside the big desk. "It was bound to happen," Steven said when we were outside.

I made no answer. Steven understood so much more about things than I did. We knew that he was about to finish with Mistress Newby's school. It had already been arranged that he would leave Washington City in the fall

and travel alone by train back to Pennsylvania, where he would go to a boy's preparatory academy. I felt lonely just thinking of his coming absence, and now there was this war thing. I remember that we spoke but little on our journey to the White House that day.

Willie and Tad Lincoln were in the garden, Tad on the ground with marbles and Willie on a bench. We had encountered the boys a few times before and had spent one afternoon playing a game of stickball with them. The boys looked alike, both with round faces that I studied, looking for some resemblance to their father. I saw none, and decided it would be impossible to see anything of that worn face in the features of a boy.

I did notice that each of them was marked with one likeness to their famous father. Their unruly hair stuck up in all the wrong places. They both stood up as we approached.

"We can't go inside," Tad told us. "Even Papa said we had to go to our rooms if we want to play inside." He dropped back to the marbles he had abandoned upon our arrival.

Willie did not sit back down. He looked at us carefully. "Did you hear? I mean, about the battle and all?"

"Yes," said Steven, and I nodded. The three of us had just settled ourselves on the bench when the president appeared. Both of his sons ran to him, and he hugged them. "I needed a breath of air," he said.

Mr. Lincoln amazed me when he remembered Steven's

name from the introduction he had been given to the staff and their families. Steven smiled widely, and introduced me to the president. "Bella's grandmother works here too," he said. "Mostly helping with the sewing."

"How do you do, Miss Bella," he said.

My heart beat wildly, but I managed a little curtsy and said, "Very well, thank you, sir."

"I am glad you've come to play with my boys," Mr. Lincoln said.

"Papa," said little Tad, "will you have to go and carry a gun now?"

The big man mussed his hair. "No, son, I'll not go to war, but I'll have to send other men, young men."

"As young as Willie and me?"

"No," said his father, "blessedly I won't be sending boys as young as you two, but there will be some who are only as old as your brother Robert."

My grandmother had told me that Robert Lincoln was away studying at a college called Harvard. "That's pretty young," said Tad. "Robert's age is pretty young."

"Yes," said his father. "Pretty young." I looked at his face and noticed tears misted in his eyes.

"Papa didn't want war," Willie said when his father had walked away. "It troubles him awful bad." There were tears in Willie's eyes too.

During those early days, everyone said it would be a quick war. Mr. Lincoln made a call for soldiers to serve three months. On May 21, word came that Richmond had

been selected as the capital for the Confederacy. I heard the news at the White House. I had come to the back garden to wait for Steven to come out before we went in to see Willie and Tad.

Steven called the news to me as soon as he saw me. "Well," I said, "I'm sure now that my father will be involved in the war. Nothing could touch Richmond so closely without touching him." I bent from my bench to study a small group of ants that moved near my feet.

Steven dropped to sit beside me. "Wish I was just a little older. I'd be in the army." He pressed his lips together hard and, forming a fist with one hand, struck at his other hand.

The thought horrified me. "That's silly," I said emphatically. "You're way too young to be a soldier."

"I'm almost twelve," he said. "The boys who strike the drums are not much older."

"But you aren't older," I said, "and you aren't going to be a soldier. You're going to be a student at a military school, that's all."

We sat for a minute without talking before he suggested we go inside. I told him I had developed a stomachache and had decided to go back home. After he left, I stayed for a time on the bench, thinking. I dreaded the day later in the summer when Steven would leave me to go to Pennsylvania to school. Now I wondered how I would feel if he were going away to be a soldier.

Then I thought of my father. I closed my eyes to

remember him, but I did not see him as he was when I was eight. Rather I saw him in a gray uniform. He would, I was certain, be a soldier. I walked home, hating the war that tore our country apart.

When our school term ended, Steven and I spent more time at the White House, often going up with Willie and Tad to the private rooms on the second floor or to play on the flat roof. We tried hard to avoid contact with Mrs. Lincoln. She was not a small lady, and the wide skirts she wore over big hoops made her seem larger. Sometimes she was pleasant, smiling and saying, "Hello, children. Willie and Tad certainly enjoy your company." The next day she might snap at us.

Someone gave the boys a small goat, and we spent many hours playing with her. She loved us all and would follow us anywhere. Once when we had failed to secure the latch on her pen correctly, Nanko followed us to the backdoor of the White House and pushed her way in behind the laughing Tad.

Mrs. Lincoln happened to be nearby and, hearing the commotion, came to see what caused it. She began shouting, at once blaming Steven and me. "Get that goat out," she ordered, "and you two urchins go with it." She grabbed an umbrella from a stand, and started to wave it at us. I ran, but Steven stayed, helping Willie pull the reluctant Nanko out the door.

Outside, we put the goat back into her pen. Willie reached through the fence to stroke Nanko's black-and-

white head. "Don't worry about Mama," he told us. "She doesn't mean to hurt people's feelings, but sometimes her troubles make her cranky."

I wondered what her troubles were, but I didn't want to ask. Steven never held back a question. He put out his hand to pet the goat too. "What troubles your ma?" he asked.

Willie spoke softly, and I had to lean close to hear. "She worries about Papa, you know, people wanting to hurt him. She frets about what people think of her too. Folks never take to her like they do Papa."

I wanted to say that people would like her better if she didn't try to hit them with umbrellas, but I didn't. Willie went on. "There's talk that she favors the South because she grew up in Kentucky."

I understood what he meant. Kentucky, like Maryland, Missouri, and Delaware, had some people who owned slaves, but those four border states had stayed in the Union even though many residents were unhappy about not pulling out. I didn't think, though, that anything Willie said really justified Mrs. Lincoln's moods.

Steven said aloud what I was thinking. He pulled back his hand and stood up. "Your mother doesn't seem to try too hard to get people to like her."

Willie stood too. "Mama's good, she really is." He pressed his lips together before going on. "She is just not happy, not most of the time, even back in Springfield. It's a burden for Papa, but he is always kind to her."

That summer of 1861 gave Steven and me our last easy days together. The Lincoln boys were kept close to home, but the two of us roamed the streets of Washington City that summer.

The city changed in July. Evidence of war had been plentiful before, soldiers everywhere, but on July 21, a battle took place not far away near a town called Manassas that was on a creek called Bull Run.

Steven had been excited about it the day before. "Lots of folks are going over there in carriages to watch," he told me. "I wish I could go."

His mood was different when he showed up at our house the next day early, even before Grandmother left for work. It was raining, and when I opened the door, he stood on our stoop with no cap to keep his head dry, the water running down his face. "Did you hear them last night?" he asked

"Who?" I asked, and I stepped aside so that he could come in.

"The soldiers. I heard them, all coming back into Washington City. I looked out our window, and there they were in the rain, just filling up the streets, not in any order at all, just men from all different regiments. Our boys got licked, bad, and they had to run back here for protection."

My grandmother had been at the stove preparing our breakfast, but she moved to the table and sank onto a chair. "This war won't be over in any three months

like they said." She leaned her face against her hands. "You children mark my words. We're in for a terrible long time."

Later, walking the streets of Washington City, Steven and I saw for the first time what war was really all about. There were wounded soldiers everywhere, bleeding around their makeshift bandages, limping and leaning on one another. They were blackened with smoke and powder, and they seemed so terribly tired, about to fall. Lots of schools and churches were turned into hospitals.

"It's like the whole city is wounded," Steven said as we wandered about, our eyes taking in the misery.

In a few days, though, we began to notice that the soldiers who were not bleeding were trying to forget their troubles when they had a bit of free time. We saw card games played under almost every shade tree. Signs on all the drinking establishments said, "No Spirits Sold to Soldiers," because that was the law, but the military men certainly got alcohol from somewhere. We saw them, even in the daytime, stumbling out of doorways, their arms around women in dresses my grandmother would have called shocking.

In fact, I did not mention to my grandmother how much time Steven and I spent on the streets of Washington City. "It's a wicked place I am bringing you up in, Bella," she would say to me from time to time. "An awful place for a child."

I did not think of the city as awful. I was fascinated by

the hurry and the crowds, and I felt great sympathy for the soldiers who might soon face death.

I discovered that Mr. Lincoln shared my attitude toward the city. Once when we were near the president's office, he came out just as a man was seeking to see him. "I am Reverend Harvey," the man said to the president. "I want to talk to you about the sin that goes on in our city." Reverend Harvey was a pinch-faced man who looked as if he had an unpleasant odor in his nose. "I shudder to think," he said stiffly, "what should happen in case of our Lord's second coming."

Mr. Lincoln laughed and clapped Reverend Harvey on the shoulder. "I wouldn't worry, sir," he said. "If the Lord has ever been to Washington before, I doubt he would choose to come again."

Steven and I liked Mr. Lincoln more and more. We also liked Mrs. Lincoln's tall, light-skinned Negro dressmaker, and it was plain Lizzie Keckley did more than just make dresses. When Willie and Tad had the measles, it was Mrs. Keckley who helped their mother care for them. "She calms Mama down," Willie told us. "Papa is mighty glad to have her around."

My grandmother liked Mrs. Keckley too and enjoyed assisting her. "You look at those eyes, Bella," she told me once as we walked home together from the White House. "You look at her eyes, and you know she's seen some things. She was a slave for thirty-seven years, hired out by her owner to make dresses for other women. That's how

she got her freedom. The women she worked for helped her raise the money so she and her boy could be free." My grandmother shook her head. "Why, she told me"—she lowered her voice, even though we were alone on the street—"Don't you go repeating this, but she told me she was so light skinned because the master had his way with her mother. After she was sold away, the same thing happened to her, forced to lie with the white man who owned her." She shook her head again. "That's why her son is so light he could join the army."

"You mean they won't let Negroes in the army?" I asked.

"No, the president's afraid the border states would join the Confederacy if we let Negroes fight."

"My mother and father had slaves," I said, although I knew my grandmother had that knowledge.

"Your mother was a good person, Bella, and I loved her. Still, that doesn't make slavery right. Just think of a woman as fine and smart as Elizabeth Keckley treated like that."

What could I say? Maryland had surprisingly not seceded as Virginia did, but many a lad from Maryland crossed her borders to serve with the Confederacy. "I could not but serve where my heart lies, with the boys in gray," I said. It was a small misspeaking of the truth. Certainly, my spirit was on the battlefield daily!

"Oh," said the lady softly, "I do not agree with the Southern cause, but I can feel nothing but admiration for a man who fights for what he believes in."

Of course, there were many who would hear the story and declare it to be untrue. To them I would merely say, "You know how stories circulate about those of us in the public eye, and it does look for all the world like a bullet wound." I would laugh off the subject. What harm could there be in such a story?

I found it to be something of a challenge to win the hearts of the women of the North even while telling them I had fought for the South. Ah, yes, their lips spoke of their love for the Union, but their hearts could be won easily by Wilkes Booth, who made no secret of his love for the Confederacy. Such a woman was Lucy Hale.

I saw her first in a dining room in Washington City where she dined with a young man I thought I recognized.

"Is that young Lincoln at the next table there?" I asked my companion, a man who knew many people connected with the government.

"It is," said he. "That's Robert, the president's oldest son."

6

WILKES

HIS STORY



So the war has begun. There was no other way. I think often of old John Brown's words about blood. There will be blood aplenty! Some of the blood has been my own. A knot grew on the side of my neck, a tumor they said it was. I went to a doctor to have it removed, and his knife cut deep into my neck. The wound healed badly, leaving a mean scar.

I do not remember exactly how it came about, the story that I had served for a time on the field of battle and been wounded there. Ah, yes, it comes back to me. I was at dinner in a hotel dining room with a woman whom I had just met. She reached across the table and touched my neck gently with her fingertips. "Were you injured in battle, sir?"

"Umph!" I made a disgusted sound, and my friend, who knew how I felt about Lincoln, smiled.

Through the first few courses of our meal, I watched the couple. Young Lincoln leaned eagerly toward the lady when she talked, and his face spoke clearly of his admiration for her. She was not a beauty, her features leaning toward thickness. Still, by the time they took their leave, I could see that there was a charm about her.

"Pray tell, who is the lady?" I asked as we watched them walk away.

My friend laughed. "Little difference her name makes to you, Wilkes," he said. "She would never look your way, not with your known allegiances. That is Lucy Hale. Her father is Robert Hale, a senator from New Hampshire. The man is a total abolitionist and a favorite of Lincoln's. They say Hale will be appointed as an ambassador when his term is up."

"Abolitionist, aye?" I raised my eyebrows in question. "And you think the lady would not find me interesting, do you?"

"Forget her, Wilkes," he said. "She has no need of a complication such as you, I am sure."

I did not forget Lucy Hale. Rather I made it my business to learn about her, and by asking about, I discovered that she lived with her parents in the National Hotel. Immediately, I changed my own place of residence to that same hotel. On the first day, I sat for a time in the lobby, as if waiting for a visitor.

It was not long before Miss Hale appeared. She was expecting a friend to come by, I heard her tell a clerk. She took a chair across from me. I pretended to read a newspaper that I had with me, but I watched her. Then I put the newspaper down on the chair beside me and looked directly at her. She smiled.

"Excuse me, dear lady, but I believe you and I have met. Are you not Elizabeth Jenkins of New York?" I said.

"I am not." She spoke somewhat shortly, but something on her face made me certain she was interested in pursuing the conversation.

"I beg your pardon," I said humbly. I dropped my eyes and held my tongue. It was not a long wait.

"I know who you are," she spoke rather peevishly, but I was certain it was a pretense. "I've seen you on the stage, and I saw you recently when I dined with a gentleman friend."

I stood and bowed slightly. "I am J. Wilkes Booth, a fact you seem to know. Won't you give me the honor of knowing your name?"

"A lady never engages herself in conversation with a gentleman unless they have been properly introduced," she said, but a smile had crept onto her lips.

"I am sorry, dearly sorry, to hear that." I looked around me wildly. "Surely there is someone about who can perform such an introduction?" I clapped my hands. "Ah, yes, there is Herbert, the desk clerk. Shall I bid him come to my aid?"

"No," she said. "I've never considered myself to be a lady." She laughed and held her hand out to me. "My name is Lucy Hale, Mr. Booth."

And so began an acquaintance, one that quickly grew into a true friendship. I found Lucy to be fascinating, far more interesting than any other woman who had held my attention in the past.

She did not adore me blindly as so many others had. Rather, she knew me with all my faults, but liked me anyway. I found myself more and more drawn to her. I remember one day as we picnicked in a park. We sat eating and watching some children, a boy of about three and his sister, who was only a toddler. Their mother and father sat on a nearby bench, and the children played about them, often coming close to our blanket.

"Would you like a strawberry?" Lucy asked. The little boy shook his head no, but his sister held out her chubby hand. Lucy gave the child the berry, and we watched the surprised look that came over her face as she tasted the somewhat tart fruit. "Children are a delight," said Lucy.

I told her about Asia's boys and the joy I found in them. She looked at me, her brows raised. "So," she said, "do you plan to be a father yourself one day, Wilkes?"

Suddenly, my heart seemed to stop. I reached for her hand. "It would be a joy," I said, "if my babies could have a mother like you."

She studied my face for a second, then shook her

head. "Oh, no, Wilkes, not I. It would never work. I could not turn my head while you played with other women."

"Why would I want other women if I had you?" I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Why indeed, Wilkes, but you would, that I know. I know too that I would not put up with your roving eye. Besides, my father would hate my being married to an actor, especially an actor with Southern sympathies. We could never be married."

"Don't speak so," I pleaded.

"For all sad words of tongue or pen, The saddest are these: It might have been," Lucy quoted "Maud Muller," a poem by John Greenleaf Whittier.

"Save your sad poems, Lucy," I declared. "I will not accept a sad ending to our love."

Lucy was a bright spot during those first years of Lincoln's presidency, but still I counted the days until another election. For a time it seemed very likely that he would not be reelected. Many people, even in the North, called Grant the cigar-smoking butcher and condemned Lincoln for supporting the general. Besides, Grant had difficulty winning, and thousands of men were killed or wounded.

All that summer of 1864 there was a spring in my step. When I was in Washington City, Lucy and I spent time together, keeping our meetings secret from her father. I fell more and more in love with the only woman I had ever known who did not beg me to marry her.

Then in August word came of a Union victory at the

Battle of Mobile Bay, cutting the city of Mobile off from supplies. On September 2, Sherman's hard-marching troops took Atlanta. I hated the Northern victories, but felt even more miserable because those victories seemed to make Lincoln more popular.

The Democrats had nominated General George B. McClellan, and at first I had hopes that he might win. My hatred for the man Lincoln had grown as big as my love for the South, bigger perhaps. Lincoln won reelection by an electoral vote of 212 to 21, and a popular majority of more than 400,000 votes.

The North was filled with fools! I drank for two days, not leaving my hotel room.

7

BELLA

HER STORY



The day I dreaded came, August 30, 1861. Steven was going away to school. His mother too was leaving on the same train, going back to Pennsylvania to live with her sister. "Just can't work for that woman," she had said about Mrs. Lincoln.

I walked with them to the train. Each of them had one small bag, and I volunteered to carry Mrs. Browning's for her. Soldiers were everywhere, even drilling on the White House lawn.

The train station too was full of soldiers, a sea of blue from their uniforms with some gold mixed in from the braids of the officers. We waited outside. Two army men sat leaning against the wall. One of them, a thin young man with red hair, played a harmonica while his dark-

haired friend sang: "Just before the battle, Mother, I am thinking most of you. While upon the field we're waiting with the enemy in view."

Steven's mother shook her head, her eyes closed. "Their poor mothers," she whispered. "I am terrible afraid Joe will be in the war soon."

When they had finished their song, the red-haired man motioned to Steven. "Say, boy, would you like to see how playing a harmonica kept Johnny Reb from killing me?"

"Yes," Steven stepped toward them. The man reached into his pocket and took out another harmonica. A bullet was lodged in it.

"Wow!" said Steven.

Mrs. Browning took his arm. "We'd better get on now," she said. They both turned to look at me.

I looked back, too choked up with tears to speak. "I'll write you letters," Steven said, "and you've got to write back. Tell me what you're doing, and what's going on, you know, at the White House and in the city."

"Good-bye, Bella," said Mrs. Browning, and she hugged me.

They moved away and started up the steps to board the train. Suddenly Steven turned back, jumped from the steps, ran back to me, and kissed me once quickly on the cheek. He whirled to dart toward the train again and bumped into a soldier.

The soldier laughed. "That's right, son," he called to Steven's moving back. "You have to kiss the ladies good-bye, all right."

The men who sat against the wall applauded. Steven found a seat beside a window, but dumbfounded, I could not even wave as the train pulled away.

During the months ahead, I wrote many letters. There was no more school for me, Mistress Newby having turned her building into a hospital, and so I filled my empty days by wandering around Washington City, looking for scenes that might interest Steven.

I wrote about how low wooden hospitals went up on every empty lot, and about how the government Patent Building became a hospital too.

Information about the White House came from my grandmother, who told me about how for a few weeks there were actually soldiers camped on the first floor of the mansion. I wrote too what Grandmother told me about how Mr. Lincoln aged more each day, his face becoming more lined, his bones almost sticking through his skin.

I could not tell Steven about what I actually saw at the White House because I did not go there without him. It had been Steven, so much more than I, who had been friends with the Lincoln boys, Steven who laughed easily when little Tad found and moved the control wheel that made all the bells in the great house sound at once, sending the staff into a state of utter confusion.

It had been Steven who did not hesitate to stop important men and ask, "Please, sir, would you explain what news there is of the war?" Sometimes he would be brushed aside, but more often than not something in Steven's earnest face made the gentleman stop to explain.

From the day when Steven first guided me to the White House, he had been my passport, the thing that made me feel my being there was right. After he went away, I too would have lost contact with the great house had it not been for Mrs. Keckley, Mrs. Lincoln's dressmaker.

My grandmother came home much excited one day in October. "Bella," she said even before she had her bonnet removed. "I've a bit of real news."

I sat at the table reading. My heart skipped forward. Always, the mention of news made me think of my father, but Grandmother's news concerned my samplers. Grandmother had, she informed me, taken them to show Mrs. Keckley. "These are remarkable." That's what she said, 'remarkable.' Grandmother dropped the bag containing my samplers on the table. "She wants you to sit on the times I help her with Mrs. Lincoln's dresses. She wants to teach you herself. Can you believe it child, such a wonderful chance to learn!"

Reluctant to encourage my grandmother further in her ambitions concerning my becoming a dressmaker, I voiced the first real worry that came to my mind. "But

Mrs. Lincoln," I protested, "you know how full of moods she is. Won't she rage about me being there?"

Grandmother shook her head. "No, 'tis the strangest thing. Lizzie Keckley seems a pure magician with the woman. I've seen it myself, Mrs. Lincoln in a fit, screaming at us about some little thing. In comes Lizzie, she brushes Mrs. Lincoln's hair or gets her a bouquet of flowers from the conservatory. First thing we know, Mrs. Lincoln is all gentle and sweet." Grandmother took off her bonnet and hung it on the wooden rack beside the door. When she turned back to me, she smiled. "Don't fret over Mrs. Lincoln. She'll be glad enough to have you."

Mrs. Keckley was usually in the White House at least every second day, but the schedule was uncertain. Often Mrs. Lincoln would decide she was wanted for something and send a coach to pick her up. I was to come each afternoon to help in the kitchen unless Mrs. Keckley was present with something she wanted to show me.

I remember so well that first day of instruction. I came to stand in the doorway, hunched and full of dread.

Mrs. Keckley bent over a buttonhole she was making. She wore a black dress with just a slight gathering of white lace at the throat. She was, I knew, in mourning for her son, who had been killed just last month in a battle in Missouri. "Doesn't even have a grave to visit," my grandmother had told me. "He's buried alongside all the others, no names to mark them."

It was my grandmother who noticed me. "Here's Bella," she said.

Mrs. Keckley looked up, her eyes sad but kind. She put down her work, came to take me by the hand, and drew me into the room. "I like teaching girls," she told me. "Been doing so most of my life, slave and free. Last time was in Baltimore where I taught girls of my race to sew. I suspect I still know how to teach." She pulled a chair for me to sit beside her.

After that first lesson, I was never shy with Mrs. Keckley again, and in fact became so comfortable that once when my grandmother was not in the room, I confided in her. I had sat beside her for several lessons by then, and when I conquered a difficult stitch, she said, "You'll be an expert with a needle before you're a woman grown."

I dropped my eyes to study my hands. "Please don't tell my grandmother." I lowered my voice to a whisper. "The truth is, I have no wish to be a dressmaker." I thought suddenly that such a statement might be something of an insult to her and her efforts. "I mean," I added quickly, "it's a fine employment, I'm sure. It must be splendid to make dresses for such grand ladies as Mrs. Lincoln." I shrugged my shoulders. "It is just that since I was but small, I've dreamed of being on the stage."

"Oh, the theater, is it?" She did not speak in such a way as to make me feel ridiculous by indicating her belief that I could never have such a profession. She smiled.

"Well, let's just go on with the lessons, shall we? A body never knows what lies ahead, and dressmaking is a skill that comes in handy in a woman's life. Why, you might want to make costumes for yourself, or for that matter might gain entrance to the theater through making costumes for others."

From that moment on, I became a dedicated student, bringing with me each time a small notebook where I recorded steps just as Mrs. Keckley told them to me. Sometimes, too, I would make simple drawings to help me understand. I was sitting on the back stairs one day waiting for my grandmother and studying my notebook when Willie Lincoln came bounding down the stairs.

He stopped when he saw me. "Bella," he said, and he smiled at me, just a little. He stood beside me, wanting, I thought, to sit down, but like me feeling shy without Steven with us. He paused for a minute, then said, "I've not seen you lately."

"I've been busy," I told him, "learning how to sew from your mother's dressmaker."

Willie smiled again, this time more fully and in a natural way. He moved his hand from the rail and lowered himself to sit beside me. "What's in your notebook?"

I noticed then that he too had a notebook. "Mine has notes from my sewing lesson," I told him. "What's in yours?"

"Mine has my poems in it," he said.

"Poems you liked from your lessons?" I asked.

He shook his head and looked down shyly. "Poems I have written," he said. He studied my face for a minute and decided to risk a question. "Would you like to see the one I'm going to send to the newspaper? It's about the death of Father's friend, Colonel Edward Baker. He got killed in battle."

"I would," I told him. He opened his notebook and pushed it toward me. I do not remember much about the poem, although I was impressed with it. I do remember one line that I read aloud. "His voice is silent in the hall."

"It's because he is dead," Willie explained. "He can't talk anymore. Father cried when he heard the news."

"My father is in the war too," I told him. "I don't live with him, but I got a letter from him yesterday that told me he had joined." I did not tell him that my father fought for the other side.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Eleven. I just had my birthday."

"I'll be eleven in two months, just before Christmas," he said.

"Steven is twelve. He's gone off to school, you know."

Willie nodded. "We could still be friends, though," he said. "I mean, even without Steven." He laughed a little. "Maybe someday I will write a poem just for you."

"And maybe someday, I will stitch a handkerchief for you."

"Make it blue, if you do," he said. "Blue is my favorite color because it's the color of our uniforms."

Almost every day that fall, Willie would be waiting for me on the stairs after my lesson with Mrs. Keckley. "I watch for you," he told me, "and when I know you are here, I hurry to finish my studies early."

Some days we played marbles. Some days we just talked. Willie told me he worried about his father. "I'm awful afraid someone will hurt him," he said. "Mama says he should be more careful, but he says what will be will be." Willie shrugged. "Sometimes I wish we had never come to Washington City."

"Oh," I said, "but the country needs your father."

He nodded his head and tried to smile. "I know," he said softly. "Besides, if we hadn't come here, I would never have had you for a friend." Walking home that evening, I, too, worried that harm might come to Mr. Lincoln.

"I talk to Willie Lincoln almost every day," I wrote to Steven. "Of course, he could never be my very best friend, like you are, but he is awful nice. He sure does worry about his father."

I had forgotten all about the poem and handkerchief agreement, but Willie hadn't. One cold day in early February he seemed a little quiet when I first joined him. After a few minutes, he said, "I wrote a poem for you, but you might think it is foolish."

"I won't." I shook my head. "I'm sure it is good. Let me see."

"I'll read it," he said, and he took a paper from his pocket.

*When this big house gets sad,
 Bella makes it not so bad.
 I always wait for her on the stairs.
 And when I'm afraid, she cares.
 She is pretty and very sweet,
 Being her friend is a real treat.*

Grandmother started down the stairs toward us then. "It's awful nice," I whispered. Embarrassed, I jumped up and hurried toward the backdoor.

"When are you going to make that blue handkerchief for me?" he called after me. Too shy to answer, I just waved my hand at him as I opened the backdoor. The next day Mrs. Keckley told me during my lesson that Willie had developed a fever during the night. "It came on terrible sudden," she said with a sigh. "I'm worried about the child."

A big party had been planned the next day, so there were no lessons. My grandmother, when she finally came home that evening, told me that Willie was worse. "They say he is burning with fever," she said. "Mrs. Lincoln thought to cancel the party, but they decided to go on with it. She was at his bedside often, though, the mister, too. They do dote on that child."

I was sitting beside the fire, but a cold feeling passed through my body. I pulled my shawl closer. "How bad is he?" I asked, and I knew my voice sounded shaky.

My grandmother came over to touch my cheek.

"You've no fever, have you child?" I shook my head. "Don't fret, Bella, girl," she said. "The boy is the son of the president. No expense will be spared. He'll have doctors and medicine aplenty."

I could not eat my supper that night, wanted only to sit beside the fire in an effort to warm away the fear I felt inside. My mother, I was sure, had not wanted for doctors nor for medicine aplenty.

There were no lessons at the White House now. Day after day, Grandmother came home to say Willie had not improved. I wished mightily for blue material to make him a handkerchief. I knew of one piece of blue cloth in the house. In the corner of our tiny cottage sat an old chifforobe that held our meager supply of clothing. Inside, I knew, was my greatest joy, the Sunday dress that my grandmother had recently made for me. It was exactly the right shade of blue. I had worn the dress twice.

Probably if I had told my grandmother how desperately I wanted a piece of bright blue cloth, she would have gotten me one. Never able to talk of the things that meant most to me, I was loath to try to explain. On the fourth day, I could fight the urge no longer. I took the dress from its hanger, caressed the folds of the skirt, carried it to the table, measured, as I had been taught, and cut a large square. I took careful, even stitches to put in the hem. Finishing just before my grandmother was expected, I held it up to admire. Even Mrs. Keckley would say it was well done.

I had no notion of what I would tell my grandmother about the dress or how I would get the gift to Willie. No sewing was being done in the White House. Mrs. Keckley nursed Willie and tried to keep Mrs. Lincoln calm.

When Grandmother did come home that evening, she had news. Tad too was ill. "The little one is no ways as bad as his brother," she said. "Their mother's a wreck, poor thing, but it's Mr. Lincoln as breaks my heart. Oh, the look on that man's face when he comes out of that room." She shook her head. "And him with the weight of this terrible war to boot."

The next day I folded the handkerchief into a small square and put it into my coat pocket. I would, I had decided, take it to the White House. The guard, of course, did not stop me, and I saw no one else as I entered the backdoor and climbed the stairs. On the second floor, the door to Mr. Lincoln's personal office was open. I stopped to look in.

The floor had a dark green carpet. I could see spots of dark green wallpaper too, but mostly the walls were covered with war maps and drawings. Newspapers were stacked on the desk and tables, along with great stacks of mail. Mr. Lincoln sat at the desk, his back to me. He seemed to be staring out the window before him.

I pulled in a great breath and tiptoed into the room to stand beside him. I thought he would turn toward me, but he did not. I waited, but his eyes never left the window. I

thought of leaving as quietly as I had come in, but I wanted mightily to give that handkerchief to Willie.

Finally, I put out my hand and touched the top of his long, suit-covered arm. "Mr. President, sir," I whispered softly.

He did not start, did not seem startled at all, but only turned to look at me, a sort of glazed expression in his soft gray eyes. "You're Mistress Cora's granddaughter," he said, and I nodded. "Our Willie's sick, but I suspect you knew that." I nodded again. "Tad too, but the doctor says Tad will mend. Willie, though..."

I took the blue material from my pocket, and I held out my hand with it lying flat against my palm. "It's a handkerchief," I said. "I made it special for Willie." Tears were coming up from my chest, and I could hear them in my voice. "He told me he was partial to blue, like the soldiers' uniforms."

"Why, thank you for making it," he said, and taking the handkerchief, he held it up to the light from the window. "You've done fine work. I'll see that Willie gets this."

He laid the cloth on his desk, swiveled in his chair, and put his arms around me. I could feel the sorrow pouring out of his heart, coming through his white shirt and black coat. I could feel the sorrow filling up the room and spilling over into the hall, but when he released me, I looked into his eyes and saw that heartbreak was still there too.

I said nothing more, just turned and moved quickly back into the hall. I never told my grandmother about cutting my Sunday dress. Probably Mrs. Keckley told her about the handkerchief. Maybe she even showed the piece to Grandmother. At any rate, a few days later I was surprised to see that my dress had been remade. The frayed skirt had been removed from the bright blue bodice, and a new skirt of a darker blue attached.

Willie died on February 20. My grandmother came home that evening very tired, her face all drawn with pain. "They say the president said, 'My poor boy. He was too good for this earth, but we loved him so. This is hard, hard.' Then he broke down and cried. I heard him from out in the hall. That great, huge man, broken like a baby." She wiped at her eyes.

The next night after we were in our beds, she asked, "Do you want to see him, child? They've laid him out in the Green Room in a white coffin, and him dressed in a fancy suit. The help all viewed him today, but I can take you tomorrow if you want to go."

I pulled the blanket up to my chin. My first impulse was to say no. I had found no comfort in looking at my mother's white face and closed eyes. I was about to say so when I changed my mind. I could not say why, but I did want to see Willie Lincoln.

My grandmother had said "the green room," and I supposed she meant the president's office, where I had seen the green carpet and green wallpaper. I imagined the

white coffin there, surrounded by maps and stacks of newspapers. I wondered if the president would sit at his desk as mourners filed by.

I was wrong. The Green Room was a big parlor on the first floor, with velvet drapes and dark wooden furniture polished to a shine. The coffin stood in the middle of the floor. I dropped Grandmother's hand when we entered the door and moved to stand beside him.

His hair was not wild, as I had always seen it, but neatly combed and parted. His hands were crossed, and he held a bouquet of small purple flowers. I looked down at him and wondered how death could slip into a person and take away the breath. I was ready to step away when I saw the handkerchief. Folded neatly into the breast pocket of his suit jacket was the handkerchief I had made for him. My hand went to my mouth to keep me from crying out loud, but I was glad, deeply glad, I had made the handkerchief.

The rest of that winter was hard for me. Not long after Willie's funeral, Tad did recover, but Mrs. Lincoln, they said, spent most of her days in bed. No parties or dinners were held at the White House, and there was no need for any sewing to be done. Mrs. Keckley spent her days trying to comfort Mrs. Lincoln. I had not supposed I would miss my sewing lessons so much, but I did.

I wrote letters to Steven, and when the winter wind was not sharp, I would walk about Washington City, my head down, thinking of all I had lost, my mother, father,

Steven, and now my new friend Willie. Sometimes I would walk down Pennsylvania Avenue to see the White House in hopes of seeing the president. Poor, dear man, he had loved his son so much. Had my father ever loved me that way? I would stand, staring up at the window where I imagined Mr. Lincoln might sit, and I would pretend that he was my father. It was all right, I told myself, to pretend. After all, I did not even know where my own father was.

8

WILKES

HIS STORY



I cannot understand Lucy. She is like no other woman I have ever known. Always I have been able to lead women to think as I think. Yet here is a woman who loves me, I know she does. Still she will not agree with me about the Union or about the evils of Abraham Lincoln.

"You could not say he is heartless had you attended his son's funeral," she told me at dinner one evening. "The sorrow in that man's face." She closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head slightly.

I reached across the table to take her hand. "Do not waste your sympathy, my darling," I said. "I've no doubt the man appeared sorry. I've never said he was a fool, but let me assure you his heart is too hard to be touched by the death of a mere child."

"No," she protested, her voice strong. "I know Robert Lincoln. He was shaken by his brother's death, and told me that his father would never be the same."

I saw a way out of the discussion. Any talk of Lincoln in real human terms distressed me. "You know Robert Lincoln?" We had never talked of young Lincoln, and I had never told her that it was seeing her with the man that had first sparked my interest in her. The idea would have made her angry. I adopted a teasing tone. "How well do you know the president's son?"

Lucy smiled. "He was my escort on several occasions, nothing more."

"Ah," I said, remembering how young Lincoln looked at her, "I'd wager there was something more on his part."

Lucy shrugged. "Perhaps for a time, but I could never be interested in him. He looks more like his mother than his father."

I laughed. "Don't tell me you would ever have been seen in public with him if he looked like his father!"

Lucy raised her eyebrows. "Looks, Wilkes, are not everything, and yes, had I seen anything of the father in Robert Lincoln, you might have had a harder time winning my affection."

How could I disagree? Had I not thought Lucy plain that first night? Now I found her wildly attractive, more pleasing than all the other women in my life. "Marry me, Lucy," I said. "Marry me now, no matter what your father thinks."

"I cannot marry you now, Wilkes, and my father is only one reason." She slipped a ring from her finger and put it on my smallest finger. "Wear this ring to remind you of me. I have not told you yet, but Father has been appointed the ambassador to Spain. We leave in the spring. I will stay there one year, and if during all that time you have been faithful only to me, I will return and marry you no matter what my father says."

I was too overcome to speak. I lifted my hand, kissed the ring. Next I lifted her hand and pressed it to my lips. We were engaged! Of course we were not able to make the fact public knowledge, but I knew, and my heart almost burst with joy.

My personal happiness, though, could not outweigh my distress over what was happening to the South and over Lincoln's reelection. No president in my lifetime had been elected to a second term. "He will make himself king now," I told Asia. My sister would listen to my concerns, even though she did not believe in the Southern cause.

We were in her home in Philadelphia, where I had gone to star in a play. Asia had made a small supper for me, and her husband playing out of town gave us a chance to talk. "I feel I should do something," I told her. "I really do."

Asia got up from her chair and came to stand beside mine. She put her arm around my shoulders and leaned her head down to rest on mine. "Don't fret so, Wilkes. I worry about you. Sometimes you seem to worry almost to the

point of breaking. 'Let us be happy.' Remember that is what you told me once. You have such a fire, my sweet boy. Don't let this war burn you out."

I tried to heed my sister's words. I even agreed to perform with my brothers. My mother was pleased. At last she had the chance to see her three actor sons on the stage together. June came in from California, and it was arranged that he, Edwin, and I should appear together in New York in a benefit performance to raise money for a wonderful bronze statue of William Shakespeare to be placed in Central Park.

I did not like the idea. Edwin actually supported Lincoln, admitted out loud that he voted for the man, and wanted to hear nothing of my love for the South. We were sitting in the living room of his New York home. I jumped to my feet. "You've turned your back on our home. You've betrayed Maryland," I accused him.

"Maryland did not secede," he answered calmly.

The ease of his manner infuriated me! Could he not see that the matter we discussed was important, was everything? "We should have seceded, by thunder! Look how Lincoln treats us, guarding our borders with suspicion and taking away our writ of habeas corpus, locking people up at will!"

He yawned! Yes, I tell you, he yawned. "How can a man as intelligent as you, Wilkes, not see that the Union must be preserved?" He picked up a book as if to show

me the discussion was at an end. "Your beloved South cannot stand. You may as well get used to the idea."

I walked out of his house then, and I decided that I would not go back except to see Mother, who is often there caring for Edwin's motherless daughter. I hate being at odds with Edwin. Nothing else has ever divided us. People suppose that there is professional jealousy between us, both of us prominent actors. Ah, yes, there is talk. . . . Who is the greatest Booth? Which brother is the country's leading actor? We pay them no heed. We are brothers. When I followed Edwin to the stage, he found true delight in my success in what is, after all, the family business.

Well, why should the Booth boys be any different from the countless other brothers this war has divided? It is, indeed, "A War of Brothers." June and Joseph support Lincoln too. My brothers' desertion of me prompted my selection of the quote I had printed on show cards and playbills. It is a quote from Richard in *Richard III*: "I have no brother, I am no brother. . . I AM MYSELF ALONE."

June is kinder to me on the subject. He was away from the family for so many years managing theaters and doing some acting out west. "This is all a family quarrel, a big family quarrel, I'll admit, but a family fuss still. It will pass, just as your hard feelings toward Edwin will pass."

Had it not been for June, acting as peacemaker, Edwin and I would never have been able to perform together.

my autograph, but I tell you it felt strange for me to be the one signing autographs in the presence of such greatness!"

I left the party then. Found Mother, kissed her quickly, and made for the door, almost unable to breathe. At first I took a hansom cab, but then I got out to walk. The wind was sharp, but I seemed to feel no cold except the cold that came from inside me. I walked along the water, stared out at the dark waves, and searched for answers.

Over the sound of the ocean, I began to recite the speech from the play I had just performed, the words that announced the death of Caesar:

"Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead!

Run hence, proclaim, cry it about the streets."

I wondered why the words resounded so in my memory. They certainly did not apply to my life. Tyranny was not dead in America, where a tyrant had just been elected for a second term. I began to shake uncontrollably, and yet I was perspiring too. I thought bright orange lights came from the ocean.

Finally my head cleared. I hailed a cab, went to the train station, and caught a train back to Washington City.

The play was Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, one of the few pieces with three strong leads for men. Edwin was Brutus, June played Cassius, and I was Marc Antony.

It was late November and bitter cold in New York. Lincoln had been reelected, and my spirits were low. The play was held at the Winter Garden, a lovely old Broadway playhouse named for one in Paris. Mother sat in a box just above the stage, and she was radiant in a black dress with a white collar. On her face was a look of complete happiness. Dear Mother! I loved my mother, hated to grieve her.

The house was packed. The Booth boys raised \$3,500 for the statue! There was a party at Edwin's after the play, everyone laughing and dancing. I pretended to smile, but the air seemed stale to me. I had to loosen my collar in order to breathe freely.

Then I heard Edwin. He was talking, surrounded by people, but Edwin's voice, of course, carries. I heard every word. I stood slightly away from the crowd, leaning against a doorframe. Edwin spoke of being at a dinner party with Abraham Lincoln, spoke of it with pride! The party was at the home of William H. Seward, secretary of state, a man I hate almost as much as I hate Lincoln.

Edwin told how Mr. Seward and Mr. Lincoln had gone several times to see him in plays at the National Theatre in Washington City, and Edwin felt honored. "What an exhilarating experience! Sitting at the same dinner table with Abraham Lincoln! Seward's daughter was wild to have