

HAROLD SINCLAIR

AMERICAN YEARS

A Novel



THE LITERARY GUILD OF AMERICA, INC.

New York

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For my sons,
WARD and MICHAEL.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS BOOK was conceived as a novel, a work of fiction, and for the most part it is fiction. But very obviously some of the characters portrayed are not fictitious. This is especially true in that portion of the book which concerns Abraham Lincoln and the men who knew him best, who helped make him President. To attempt to make these men appear as "fictitious" characters, in order to maintain the theory of the work being a novel, seemed to me not only impossible but pointless. Some of these names have long since become a part of American history; others are perhaps not so well known but are nevertheless "historical." I have tried to make them appear as men, moved by the common motives and emotions of men. Peace to their ashes!

“And you America,
Cast you the real reckoning for your present?
The lights and shadows of your future, good or evil?”

—WALT WHITMAN

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CHAPTER ONE

1830

JAMES ALLIN SAT ON A STUMP in the chip-strewn dooryard of the cabin, polishing industriously at the rust spots on a saw and letting his rheumatic shoulder joints soak up the warmth of the sun. He was a small man, slender and wiry, with steady gray eyes and a high forehead that lost itself in the shiny baldness of his pate. Now in his early forties, he had wandered by devious and sundry ways over a dozen states and territories, finally ending here in Illinois, a goodly piece from the Rhode Island where he had been born. Three or four times he had figured he had found the place to end his wanderings, but always the grass had seemed a little greener somewhere else. Now he was sure that this lush Illinois prairie was the greenest spot a man of his age would be likely to find. He had come here from Vandalia the previous October, with a stock of general merchandise and part of his household belongings, and spent the winter with the Goodheart family, east of the Grove. His wife and five children he had left in Vandalia, and shortly he would be going after them. Everything was ready now, and there wouldn't be much business until after the spring planting was done.

For two years before he came to Maple Grove he had worked in Vandalia, that hard-cased seat of government in one of the

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Union's youngest states. He had been a clerk at the Prairie House, and as such had received a thorough grounding in the principles and practices of the democratic method. Full many a senator, his brow heavy with cares of state and his innards heavier with Monongahela whisky, Allin had piloted to bed, and many a matter of critical state importance he had seen or heard settled at the Prairie House bar. Naturally, a man in his position made a good many friends, and for favors done he had been offered several sinecures at the State House. But he had always refused them, for he had other plans. Not the plans of an empire builder, perhaps, but plans of a definite and practical nature nonetheless. He had heard tales about the richness of the north central part of the state. That section was growing; it must grow; the flood of newcomers must go somewhere. And this place, so the tales had it, was the fairest in a fair state. Now that he had seen it, he knew the tales were true. There would be new counties formed, roads built, new towns springing up. There would be more and more people to sell goods to—and Allin was a trader by nature.

Now, on this bright blue-and-gold morning in April, he looked upon his world and found it, not perfect, but so far satisfactory.

The cabin had been begun in early March, as soon as the snow was gone. It was a saddlebag affair: two cabins built facing each other, with a covered runway between them. One room boasted a fireplace and served as living quarters; the other was fitted with a rude counter and a set of rough shelving along one wall. On the side of the cabin nearest the road there hung a sign made from a walnut slab, smoothed down by hand and the letters burned in with a hot iron. The sign bore the legend:

JAMES ALLIN, ESQ.,
GEN'L MDSE OF ALL KINDS
I DON'T SELL WHISKY.

The stock on the shelves was small but well assorted, and at the moment was the only one of its kind nearer Maple Grove

than Pekin, thirty-five miles away on the Illinois River. There were salt, sugar, candle cotton, beeswax, millsaw files, bar iron, thread, pit- and hand-saw files, sieves and riddles, grindstones, axes, shovels, smoothing irons, cutlery, lead, powder, penholders and paper, shot, plug tobacco, looking glasses, flannels, muslins and combs. It was frontier merchandise—the kind of goods which could not easily be made at home, but which a man could scarcely get along without.

From his vantage point on the stump Allin could look southward to the bluish line where the rolling ocean of prairie ended at the horizon. The grass was already tall as a tall man's head, the turf underneath more than a foot thick and as tough as the bed bolts of hell. It ought to be; it had been growing and settling for ten thousand years, since about the time the last glacier went south. The rolling monotony was broken by occasional clumps of stalwart oaks or walnuts or maples, sometimes three or four together, hardly ever more than a dozen.

Maple Grove was a different matter. Its towering green walls extended for three miles east and west in an almost straight line, and northward it extended more than half as far. The muddy wagon track which skirted the southern side of the timber was the main, in fact the only, road to Vandalia, and it turned abruptly to the left at the far corner of the timber. The Allin store was just between the Grove and the road, where no passing traveler could possibly miss it.

The man on the stump glanced up from his polishing and eyed a beetle maneuvering among the chips at his feet. Without moving his head he shot an unerring stream of tobacco juice at the laboring beetle, then chuckled silently as it struggled madly under the sudden deluge. Somewhere out in the moving waves of grass a meadow lark sang like a mad fool, and above Allin's head, in a tall elm, two squirrels scolded each other happily. Then a sudden shift in the direction of the breeze brought the man the faint musical tinkle of an ox bell. He listened for a moment, then stood up and stretched, and as he did so a startled doe that had been loitering at the timber darted back into the green security

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and vanished. Allin went in and put the saw away, then came back and stood waiting in his doorway.

The road wasn't quite as much of a mud haul as it had been a week or so before, but it was still a long way from being a boulevard. The wagon hove into sight a minute later, loaded to the roof and making heavy weather of it. A man and a woman were on the seat, and a pair of towheaded, freckle-faced boys, as alike as two peas, rode on the tail gate and dangled their bare feet behind. The outfit was patched in a hundred places and had seen many a long, hard mile, but in these parts that was no novelty. Most outfits had seen hard use or they wouldn't have been here in the first place. But it was the appearance of the couple on the wagon box that held Allin's attention. They looked as if they'd seen harder use than the wagon, and that within the last few hours, something like a minor war, maybe. The oxen settled back comfortably in their tracks and hung their heads to blow.

"Howdy," said Allin. "Fine day."

"Howdy," said the driver, and spat over a wheel into the mud. "Sure is."

Allin continued to stare. The man was carrying one arm in a sling made from a dirty rag, and his shirt hung in shreds about his chest and shoulders. His face and the upper part of his body looked as though he'd gone through a grist mill backwards. The woman was battered and skinned about as badly, except that all her legs and arms seemed to be intact.

Allin wondered if they treated each other that way.

"You got anything that 'd help these scratches any?" the man asked then.

"I reckon," Allin answered. "I got some salve that's good for saddle an' collar galls. That oughta be good."

"We'll try it," the man said, and got down over the wheel and introduced himself.

He said his name was Yancy, originally from South Carolina, more recently from Slemmons Prairie, forty miles east of Van-

dalia. They were moving up country and the night before had stopped at a grove six or seven miles to the southwest.

"What happened?" Allin asked. "Did you try to bed down with a wolf pack?"

Yancy thoughtfully touched a deep gash and sighed. He looked off at the horizon as though reluctant to speak of the regretted past.

"Well," he began finally, "we came up to that grove like I told you, an' decided to stay the night there. We found a cabin that didn't have no door nor no fireplace to it, and it looked like nobody had lived there fer quite a spell. Maybe never had. After we got settled I seen signs of some hogs that 'd been in the place, but I jest figgered they'd belonged to some drover that 'd passed that way. We built a fire in the hole where the fireplace should of been, brushed up the place a little, and turned in early. We was all pretty well tuckered."

He paused, to let Allin get the setting clear in his mind.

"Well, sir," he continued, "I woke up about midnight, a-hearin' the damndest gruntin' and yowlin' a man ever put ear to. The fire had died down, but there was still a middlin' bed of coals, an' behind them coals was a dozen o' the biggest, mean-lookin', damn long-snouted hogs you ever laid eyes on. Then I lept up, an' there was three or four more climbin' over my feet an' a dozen more headin' in through the door. I yelled at the woman an' boys an' then threw an armload o' wood onto the fire, where it blazed up bright, an' I could see what in tarnation was comin' off. Well, sir, when the blaze flared up I could see one solid mass o' hogs clear to the edge of the clearin' an' on into the timber. There in the light you could see some o' them hogs had tushes anyway two inches long, and they was nearly as big as calves. I boosted the young uns up to the crosspoles an' yelled to the woman to git a billet o' wood an' watch the fire hole while I took over the doorway. I took a couple o' good clouts at them already inside, an' they was so surprised they headed easy. But them in the back kept pushin' up, an' from then on she was sure enough a battle. I smashed an' battered at them hogs till

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I thought my arms would drop plumb off. They kept chargin' the door, and sometimes they was piled three an' four deep there in the doorway. The woman had it a little easier 'cause she had the fire betwixt her an' them. But twice or three times I went down, an' then she had to come an' fight 'em off me an' then them on her side would gain on her. Once I knocked the snout clean off one rarin' old boar, an' he went tearin' off through the rest of 'em, makin' fer the woods and a-yowlin' fit to curdle a man's blood. We musta fought 'em at least a full two hours. Finally, when we was both jest about to cave in, a couple of old boars broke for the timber, an' in five minutes there wasn't a hog in sight."

"Them was Isaac Frink's hogs," observed Allin.

"Un-hunh. Well, we was too shook up to do any more sleepin', so we jest sat up till sunup an' then got loaded ready to pull out. Jest as we was fixin' to leave, up come a whisky barrel of a man with a face like a flint rock. His two boys was with him an' all of 'em carryin' rifle guns like they meant big business. Right off he began cussin' an' layin' us out proper, wantin' to know what in the consarned hell we meant, abusin' an' maulin' his hogs an' half killin' I don't know how many."

"He thinks more o' them hogs than he does his own kinfolks," Allin observed.

"I reckon," Yancy agreed. "Well, he wasn't no madder 'n I was. But I couldn't reach my gun, an' there was three of 'em. Pretty soon, though, he calmed down, an' he seen how beat out we was. Then we talked it over an' interduced ourselves, an' he invited us to come over to his place an' rest up if we wanted to, but we jest said much obliged an' come on."

"That's Isaac Frink, all right. They say he knows every hog he's got by sight, an' he's got more hogs than any six men in the county. He's a hard man, but fair an' honest accordin' to his lights."

"Un-hunh. There was some nice-lookin' land down that way, an' I kinda thought o' stoppin' off. But we come on. A man don't want them hogs always worryin' him baldheaded."

"There's plenty of good land," Allin told him. "On to the northeast edge o' the Grove and beyond. Up north of the Goodheart place. All the land a man could ever ask for, with plenty o' timber an' water."

"You been here long?" Yancy asked.

"Only since last fall. But it's a good country, an' more people comin' in all the time."

"It's a long ways to a town," Yancy said. "Me, I don't like to git too far away from things."

"It's a long ways to a town now," agreed Allin. "Pekin, the county seat over on the river. But it won't always be that far."

"How do you figger that?"

"Because I'm goin' to start me a town within a mile o' here."

"Un-hunh. When?"

"This fall—jest as soon as the legislature meets and we can get a new county fixed up."

"Well, I sure do like the looks of this country around here myself. But it's a little late to get a crop in this year."

"Not if you git right at it. Get your corn in by the middle o' May, that's soon enough. You got a month yet."

The Yancys stayed until after noon, made a few minor purchases, then went on.

"You stop and see Goodheart," Allin shouted after them as a final reminder. "He'll tell you anything you need to know about that country up around there."

The battered wagon pulled out of sight, and Allin went back to his saw polishing. He hadn't done much business, but one more settler had come, probably to stay. He went on with his polishing, thinking about his plans for a town. As he had told Yancy, fall would be soon enough. Then the legislature would meet, and he and the others in the Maple Grove region would get the authority they needed. He, Allin, had the Vandalia end all fixed; that would be easy. Now, in the meantime, he could plan other things. How, for instance, he could do himself the most good in this future town he was planning.

The meager track of road wandered eastward for three miles, to the edge of Maple Grove, then turned northward again, finally to vanish altogether at the bank of the Mackinaw. And between Allin's store and the Mackinaw perhaps ten families were more or less settled, most of them in sight of the thin road track, as though clinging to something familiar.

And how should they be called: Adventurers? Farmers? Pioneers? Riffraff who couldn't make a success in the more settled East, or the strongest blood and sinew in America, scornful of the East's easy ways and unmindful of frontier hardships? Well, they were all of these and still not completely any of them. A frontier is almost always like that. Certainly they were as motley a crew of individualists as might be found in North America, yet they had certain common characteristics. Most of them were as tough as the wolves they fought in winter, hard workers, free men who took physical hardship and political freedom—such as it was—as a matter of course. Most of them were of the second generation after the Revolutionary War—their grandfathers had fought *that* war—but many of them, especially the older men, had seen service in the War of 1812. And most of them were of the second wave of settlers, those who really put something into the land, or tried to; those who, consciously or otherwise, wanted to build something permanent, something a man could look at and say, "This is mine, and shall be my children's." Some of them would succeed; others would give up and move on to a place that looked easier but wasn't; others would build something good for those who came after them to steal legally.

Generally speaking, they all held the same superstitions, the same distrust of the few Indians left hereabouts, and the same superb belief in their own capabilities. One and all they settled close to the big timber. For didn't it stand to reason that ground which would grow trees like these could grow crops accordingly?