

**LINCOLN**

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A N O V E L

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**GORE  
VIDAL**

# LINCOLN

A NOVEL

# GORE VIDAL

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**"Lincoln was an astonishing achievement, the greatest historical novel of our time."**

Allan Massie  
*The Scotsman*

**"Lincoln reaches for sublimity, as in the moving account of the president's visit to the Confederate wounded, or the telling of Willie's death and Mary Todd's encroaching madness. There are passages that make one weep. This novel will, I suspect, maintain a permanent place in American letters. There has been no better prose in the last 50 years than that with which Vidal narrates the streaming of the panicked people down Pennsylvania Avenue to the 'soft thud of cannons' from the debacle of the first Bull Run. The portrait of Winfield Scott, in whose face the 'worms [were] at work' as he absorbs the meaning of the disaster, is one of many small masterpieces within the masterful whole."**

Andrew Delbanco  
*The New Republic*

**"There are some wonderful things in *Lincoln*... by far the most important is the presented character of Lincoln himself.... He is in Vidal's version at once more complex, mysterious and enigmatic, more implacably courageous and, finally, more tragic than the conventional public images, the marble man of the memorial. He is honored in his book."**

George Garrett  
*Chicago Tribune*

**"The portrait is reasoned, judicious, straightforward and utterly convincing... even more compelling than *Burr*. In his ongoing chronicle of American history... Mr. Vidal is concerned with dissecting, obsessively and often brilliantly, the roots of personal ambition as they give rise to history itself.... There are dramatic ironies which Mr. Vidal handles with exquisite tact and skill. His *Lincoln* is not a debunked portrait by any means... and, as the novel runs its course, he emerges as a truly outstanding man."**

Joyce Carol Oates  
*The New York Times Book Review*

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"The most vivid personage in the book is Mary Todd Lincoln. The author has taken her rages, her erratic behavior, her extravagance, her pretensions, and out of these, he has made her into a startling counterpart to Lincoln himself. His Mary Lincoln is another citizen consumed by the Civil War: loathing slavery—her denunciation of it is a brilliantly moving passage—loving her Southern connections, understanding her husband more profoundly than anyone else, all the while tormenting him more wretchedly than anyone else."

Richard Eder  
*Los Angeles Times*

"Here is historical fiction by one of our country's wittiest and most piercingly intelligent writers and essayists about one of the most crucial periods out of the American past.... There is a lot of history here, and much of it is fascinating, particularly the feel of the Union's capital on the eve of the Civil War and the tension between Unionists and the secessionist factions."

Alan Cheuse  
*Los Angeles Herald Examiner*

"Richly entertaining... In his skeptical panorama of Civil War Washington, awash with fear, greed, ambition, and even nobility, Vidal obviously means to redress Sandburg's several-million-word saint's life. As he did in *Burr* and *1876*, Vidal has used the newspapers, diaries and letters of the time to make a solid historical base; then, maintaining the third-person viewpoint, he lets us pry into the peculiar minds of his true-life characters. The result works like a talisman.... For the general reader the elegant explication of the issues of the day gives hearty satisfaction: history lessons with the blood still hot."

Shelby Coffey III  
*The Washington Post*

"Vidal is the best all-round American man of letters since Edmund Wilson.... This is his most moving book."

Walter Clemons  
*Newsweek*

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"We come back to the man, again and again, wondering whether this deified figure in American history will reveal himself. He does, but his revelation is as indirect as the man himself, and therein lies Gore Vidal's literary triumph. There is no handy and cheap psychoanalysis here, but rather a careful scrutiny of the actions that spring from the core of Lincoln himself.... We are left to figure out the man as if he were a real person in our lives."

Rita Mae Brown  
*Chicago Sun Times*

"Vidal...has found his truest subject, which is our national political history during precisely those years when our political and military histories were as one.... Vidal's imagination of American politics, then and now, is so powerful as to compel awe.... No biographer, and until now no novelist, has had the precision of imagination to show us a plausible and human Lincoln, of us and yet beyond us."

Harold Bloom  
*New York Review of Books*

"Vidal's *Lincoln* is a brilliant marriage of fact and imagination. It's just about everything a novel should be—pleasure, information, moral insight. Vidal...gives us a man and time so alive and real that we see and feel them. And their imprint is so forcefully made that it's unlikely we will ever envision Lincoln and Civil War Washington again in the same way.... A superb book."

Webster Schott  
*The Cleveland Plain Dealer*

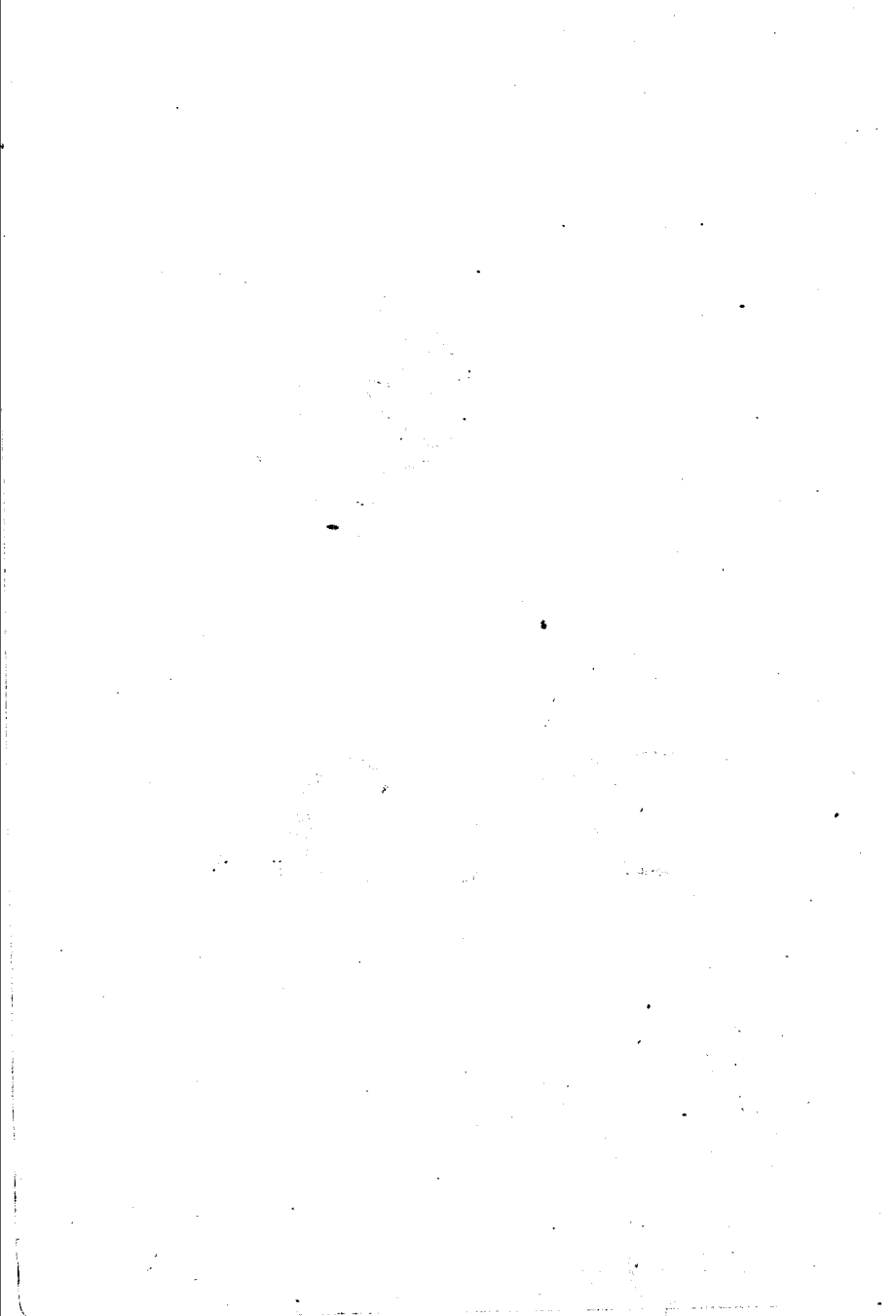
"The best American historical novel I've read in recent years."

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.  
*Vanity Fair*

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# Part One





ELIHU B. WASHBURNE OPENED HIS GOLD WATCH. THE SPIDERY hands showed five minutes to six.

"Wait here," he said to the driver, who said, "How do I know you're coming back, sir?"

At the best of times Congressman Washburne's temper was a most unstable affair, and his sudden outbursts of rage—he could roar like a preacher anticipating hell—were much admired in his adopted state of Illinois, where constituents proudly claimed that he was the only militant teetotaller who behaved exactly like a normal person at five minutes to six, say, in the early morning of an icy winter day—of the twenty-third of February, 1861, to be exact.

"Why, you black—" As the cry in Washburne's throat began to go to its terrible maximum, caution, the politician's ever-present angel, cut short the statesman's breath. A puff of unresonated cold steam filled the space between the congressman and the Negro driver on his high seat.

Heart beating rapidly with unslaked fury, Washburne gave the driver some coins. "You are to stay here until I return, you hear me?"

"I hear you, sir." White teeth were quickly bared and unbared in the black, cold-puckered face.

Washburne buttoned up his overcoat and stepped carefully onto the frozen mud that was supposed to be the pavement of a stately avenue leading to the squalid train depot of Washington City, capital of thirty-four United States that were now in the process of disuniting. He fluffed up his beard, hoping to better warm his face.

Washburne entered the depot as the cars from Baltimore were rattling to a halt. Negro porters were slouched along the sidings. Huge carts stood ready to be filled with Northern merchandise to be exchanged for Southern tobacco, raw cotton, food. Currently, the Southerners were saying that Washington City was the natural capital of the South. But they did not say it, if they were wise, in Washburne's irritable Western presence.

Just past the locomotive, the representative of Illinois's first district stationed himself in front of an empty gilded wagon whose

sides were emblazoned with the name of Gautier, the town's leading caterer, a Frenchman who was, some claimed but never he, the lost Dauphin of France.

As Washburne watched the sleepy travellers disembark, he wished that he had brought with him at least a half-dozen Federal guards. Since the guards were just coming off night duty, no one would think it odd if they should converge, in a casual sort of way, upon the depot. But the other half of the semi-official Joint Congressional Committee of Two, Senator William H. Seward of New York, had said, "No, we don't want to draw *any* attention to our visitor. You and I will be enough." Since the always-mysterious Seward had then chosen not to come to the depot, only the House of Representatives was represented in the stout person of Elihu B. Washburne, who was, suddenly, attracted to a plainly criminal threesome. To the left, a small sharp-eyed man with one hand plunged deep in his overcoat pocket where the outline of a derringer was visible. To the right, a large thickset young man with both hands in his pockets—two pistols? In the center, a tall thin man, wearing a soft slouch hat pulled over his eyes like a burglar, and a short overcoat whose collar was turned up, so that nothing was visible between cap and collar but a prominent nose and high cheekbones covered with yellow skin, taut as a drum. In his left hand he clutched a leather grip-sack containing, no doubt, the tools of his sinister trade.

As the three men came abreast of Washburne, the congressman said, "Well, you can't fool me, Abe."

The small man turned fiercely on Washburne, hand half out of his overcoat pocket, revealing the derringer's barrel. But the tall man said, "It's all right, Mr. Pinkerton. This is Congressman Washburne. He's our welcoming committee."

Warmly, Washburne shook the hand of his old friend the President-elect of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, a fellow politician from Illinois, who was supposed to be murdered later on in the day at Baltimore.

"This is Ward Hill Lamon." Lincoln indicated the thickset man, who withdrew his right hand from his pocket to shake the hand of Washburne, who stared dumbly at Lamon's hand, ablaze with what looked to be barbarous jewellery.

Lincoln laughed. "Hill, when you're in the big city you take your brass knuckles off."

"It's in *this* city that I better keep them on." And Washburne noticed that Lamon—who spoke with a Southern accent—did exactly that. Meanwhile, Pinkerton had moved on ahead, studying the passers-by with such suspicion that he himself began to attract attention. Lincoln said what Washburne was thinking. "Mr. Pink-

erton is what they call a detective, and detectives always make quite a fuss, trying not to be noticed."

To Washburne's relief, no one recognized Lincoln. But then he himself had been in a moment's doubt when Lincoln had pushed down his collar, to reveal a short, glossy black beard that entirely changed the shape—and expression—of his face.

"Is it false?" Washburne stared hard. They were now standing beneath a huge poster of "Abraham Lincoln, the President-elect. Welcome to Washington City." The cleanshaven face of the poster was hard, even harsh-looking, while the bearded face looked weary, but amiable. To Washburne, the President-elect resembled a prosperous, down-state Illinois farmer come to market.

"No, it's real. What you might call an adornment. I had to do something useful on the train from Springfield." Lincoln leapt to one side as two huge black women carrying a tub of pork sausage meat hurried toward the cars. Then Pinkerton motioned that they were to follow him outside.

As they moved toward the door of the depot, Washburne said, "I've hired a carriage. Governor Seward was supposed to meet us here. But he must've overslept. We've put you up at Willard's Hotel. General Scott thinks you'll be safer there than in that house we found for you."

Lincoln did not answer. Washburne wondered if he was listening. Outside the depot, the shrunken wintry sun resembled a small, pale, yellow seal affixed to the parchment-gray sky to the left of where the Capitol's dome should be but was not. Instead, from the round marble base, reminiscent of one of Gautier's white wedding cakes, a large crane was silhouetted against the sky like a gallows.

"They took the old lid off, I see." Lincoln ignored Pinkerton's efforts to get him into the waiting barouche.

"God knows when they'll get the new one on," said Washburne. "There's talk in Congress that we should just leave it the way it is."

"No." Lincoln shivered suddenly. "I always forget," he said, "how cold the South gets in winter."

The four men climbed into the carriage. Pinkerton sat next to the driver. Lamon sat with his back to the driver's seat while Lincoln and Washburne shared the back seat. Washburne noticed that Lincoln never let go of the grip-sack. Even while seated, he clutched it so hard that the huge knuckles of his hand were white.

"The crown jewels?" Washburne indicated the case. Lincoln laughed, but did not release his hold on the handle. "My certificate of good character. It's the inaugural address. I gave it to my son Bob to look after and he mislaid it in Harrisburg. The only copy

there is!" Lincoln visibly winced at the memory. "We had to go through two tons of luggage to find it. I could've killed that boy. Anyway, I've carried it ever since."

"We're all sort of curious to hear what you'll say..." began Washburne.

But Lincoln was not to be drawn out. "I see there's been some new building going on." He looked out the window at the north side of Pennsylvania Avenue where the great hotels were lined up, like so many brick barracks interspersed with saloons and shops. Near the corner of Sixth Street was Brown's Hotel.

"Brown's was here when you were here in the forties."

Lincoln nodded. "Mrs. Lincoln and I spent our first night in Washington there. Then we moved to a boardinghouse with the two boys, who were not as popular as they ought to have been. The Widow Spriggs, our landlady was called."

On Twelfth Street there was the Kirkwood House and, finally, on the corner of Fourteenth Street and Pennsylvania Avenue stood the center of the city's political and social life, Willard's Hotel, nicely situated opposite the Treasury Building, which was placed, most symbolically everyone thought, in a line with the hotel and the President's House.

At six-thirty in the morning the city was not yet properly awake. The hacks that were usually lined up in front of each hotel were not to be seen. Only Negroes—slave and free—were on the move, bringing food to the hotels, cleaning the stairs of the houses and taverns, moving briskly in the cold.

"I see they've made a stab at paving the avenue," said Lincoln, as the carriage skittered over cobbles so ill-set that they made the avenue look even more like a vast, wild field than plain frozen mud might have done. "Not a very serious stab," he added.

At the end of Pennsylvania Avenue, the original city planners had intended that the President's House should face, in constitutional harmony, the Capitol. But the Treasury building now blocked most of the view of the Executive Mansion, while the rest was hidden by a large windowless red-brick building, which intrigued Lincoln. "That's new. What is it? A prison?"

"No. That's President Buchanan's barn. He's very proud of it. In fact, it's about the only thing he's done in four years."

A horsecar rattled into view, only half full at this early hour; the stove at the back of the car smoked badly.

"The trolleys are since your time," said Washburne. "They now go all the way from the Navy Yard to Georgetown. That's six miles," Washburne added, aware that he had once again lost his old friend's attention. The curiously lidded left eye—like a

frog's—was half shut, always a sign that its owner was either deep in thought or mortally tired.

The main entrance to Willard's Hotel was at the corner where Fourteenth Street and Pennsylvania Avenue met. Bare trees sprouted from the brick sidewalk to either side of the door; farther down the avenue a small Greek temple had been completely enveloped by the huge hotel.

"You remember the old Presbyterian church?" Washburne was beginning to feel like a city guide. "Well, now it's a part of Willard's. It's a concert hall. The Peace Conference is meeting there." He examined Lincoln's face to see what his reaction might be, but there was none.

The carriage stopped at the main door. A uniformed Negro helped the men out of the carriage. "Baggage, gentlemen?"

"By the next train," said Lincoln.

"But, gentlemen—" Pinkerton spun the man to one side. "This way," Pinkerton said, darting into the hotel.

"A very forceful individual," Lincoln observed, with a smile.

Inside the lobby, a half-dozen black porters dozed on their feet while an assistant manager of uncommon whiteness—as if in deliberate hierarchical contrast to the staff—examined a heap of letters at his marble counter. The lobby was high-ceilinged and smelled of coal smoke. Huge dark armchairs were set haphazardly about the room, each with its shining spittoon to hand. Benches of horsehair lined the walls. A few forlorn guests stood surrounded by luggage, waiting to be taken away.

Pinkerton caught the assistant manager's attention by slamming his fist on the marble counter. What had been the whitest of faces turned pink with irritation; then even whiter than before when Pinkerton whispered in his ear. The assistant manager hurried from behind his reception counter; shook Washburne's hand and said in a voice that broke with tension, "Welcome to Willard's Hotel, Mr. President."

"This is the President," said Washburne, indicating Lincoln.

"President-elect," said Lincoln. "Let's not tempt fate. There's still ten days to go yet."

"Your rooms, sir, aren't ready." The assistant manager addressed Lamon, who had taken Washburne's place as Lincoln in his mind. "You see, we didn't expect you until this afternoon and Mr. William Dodge, of New York—he's the merchant prince, a valued customer—is in Parlor Suite Number Six and as it's only six-thirty-four, he's not even up yet, I'm fairly certain..."

Lincoln turned to Lamon, "You work this one out." At that moment an aged white porter approached Washburne and, in a

pronounced brogue, said, "Well, Mr. Washburne, sir, I see you've brought us a president."

"This is Mike," said Washburne to Lincoln, "the most cunning man in the city."

"So cunning, sir, that he'll take you straight to Governor Seward." With that, Lincoln and Washburne were led into the main dining room, where Seward sat alone at the end of a long table, puffing a cigar, eyes half-closed. Back of him, waiters were placing chafing dishes on a huge buffet; otherwise, the vast room was empty.

At the sight of Lincoln, Seward sprang to his feet; he was not, Washburne noted, much taller standing than seated. Once red-haired, now white-haired, large-nosed, pale-eyed, long-time master of the state of New York, not to mention of the youthful Republican Party, as well as President-that-might-have-been had Lincoln's managers not outmaneuvered his managers at the Chicago Convention, William H. Seward was seven years older than his rival, the new President, whose hand he now shook, saying in a husky voice, richly seasoned by a lifetime's addiction to cigar smoke and snuff, "You're every bit as tall as I'd thought you'd be, Mr. Lincoln." Seward looked up at Lincoln, who was exactly a foot taller than he. "I never really got a good look at you when we met for those two minutes during the campaign."

"And you're as handsome, Governor, as your portraits," Lincoln bowed like a jackknife—a droll, swift effect, thought Washburne, delighted to be present at the first real meeting of the great rivals who had threatened to divide the six-year-old Republican Party between the free-the-slaves-at-any-cost abolitionists occasionally represented, if not exactly led, by Seward, and the more moderate no-extension-of-slavery Westerners represented by Lincoln, a successful railroad lawyer and political failure: one term in the House of Representatives twelve years ago; one lost race for the Senate two years ago; and now the Presidency. Even Lincoln's old friend Washburne still found it hard to believe that such an incredible political miracle had indeed taken place. But then Washburne was not alone in being unable to figure out just how it was that Lincoln had managed to seize the nomination from Governor Seward; and then go on to defeat the Northern Democratic candidate, the famous Stephen A. Douglas—who had so decisively defeated *him* for the Senate—as well as two other candidates, the Southern Democratic candidate, John C. Breckinridge, and the Whig John Bell. With not quite forty percent of the total vote, Lincoln was very much a minority president; but he was president.

Seward motioned for Lincoln to sit at the head of the table

with himself to the right and Washburne to the left. When Seward called for a waiter, he was greeted with a hoot of laughter. "We don't serve nothin' till eight."

"Mikel" shouted Washburne. The old porter moved amongst the waiters; in a matter of minutes, they were breakfasting on the first Potomac shad of the year.

"I guess this will be about the last time you'll ever be able to eat in here," Seward helped himself liberally to the shad's roe.

"I'm sure that there will be worse privations in store for me." Lincoln munched an apple. A teetotaller like Washburne, Lincoln was also, unlike his friend, averse to food in general. For several years Washburne, stout and rosy, had been urging Lincoln to eat more, if only to cure himself of a constipation so severe that he seldom moved his bowels more than once a week; and was obliged to drink by the gallon a terrifying laxative called blue mass. But Lincoln looked healthy enough, thought Washburne, if too lean; and he was strong as the proverbial ox; could lift from the floor, with arm outstretched, a heavy ax at the shaft's end.

When the fascinated waiters had moved out of earshot—and Mike had moved to stand guard at the door—Lincoln said to Seward, in a low voice, "I will never live this down, sneaking like a thief into the capital."

"Sir, the plot was real," Seward sneezed; then blew his nose loudly in a yellow silk handkerchief.

Washburne substituted for the momentarily incapacitated leader. He turned to Lincoln: "As your car was passing through Baltimore—they pull it by horses, you know, between the two depots—a gang of plug-uglies were planning to waylay you then and there."

"But with sufficient guards—"

Seward interrupted Lincoln with a wave of an unlit cigar. "There wasn't time between when we got news of the plot and your arrival in Baltimore. So General Scott insisted you come, as you did, with both houses of Congress informally concurring." Seward looked at Washburne, who nodded gravely, as sole representative of the lower house.

Lincoln stretched his arms until his back made a creaking sound. "I can't say I'd have objected too much to getting shot. I tell you I thought that trip would never end. There is nothing more like eternity than a train ride of twelve days, unless," he added, "it's two people and a ham, as my father-in-law used to say." Seward chuckled and lit his cigar.

"The trip sounded like a triumph, from what we read in the press," said Washburne.

"Well, I've never given so many speeches and said so little. So I suppose it was remarkable in that."

Seward blew cigar smoke at the ceiling. "I was troubled to read, sir, that you had said somewhere along the line that no great harm had been done, even though six states have already left the Union and even more are threatening to go, while rebels are busy seizing Federal property all the way from Florida to North Carolina."

"I said no harm to *anyone* has been done." Lincoln's voice was even. "As yet."

The last monosyllable had its effect on both Seward and Washburne.

"You know," said Seward, trying a different tack, "that I am supposed to be the war-to-the-knife fellow—"

"The conflict is 'irrepressible' is what you said." Lincoln smiled. "That's how you got me the nomination."

"Damnedest stupidest speech I ever gave!" Seward paused. "I know you don't drink or smoke. Do you draw the line at profanity, too?"

"Why, no! Fact, once when I was out on the circuit in Illinois, a stranger offered me whiskey and I said, no, I don't drink and then he gave me a chew of tobacco and I said, no, I don't chew and then he said, 'Well, I've found that those with damned few vices have damned few virtues.'"

Over the years, Washburne had heard Lincoln tell this particular story a dozen times; and the wording never varied. Lincoln's little stories tended to come at regular intervals, as a form of punctuation—or evasion. But Lincoln was also a master of the long, cumulative, funny story; and many times Washburne had sat at the stove of some backwoods Illinois tavern when the lawyers on circuit would compete in story-telling and it was always Lincoln who won. Once he had got a group to laugh at the first detail, he would then add, relentlessly, more and more wilder and wilder details until men choked with laughter as the easy tenor voice continued, with all due gravity, to make them positively drunk with laughter. He was equally impressive as a speaker on those occasions when he was carefully prepared. But then, except as a humorist, he had no naturally easy way with an audience. He needed a well-prepared brief. Washburne hoped that the grip-sack on the chair next to Lincoln contained such a brief.

Seward suggested that Lincoln visit his new home later in the day and meet the outgoing president, Mr. James Buchanan. "A harmless old thing," said Seward.

Washburne could not let that go so easily. "Harmless? He let the rebels in Florida seize Federal property at Pensacola and Key



West. He let the rebels in South Carolina occupy Fort Moultrie, a *Federal* fort. . . .”

“I don’t think Mr. Buchanan can be held entirely responsible.” Seward was mild. “After all, they gave us plenty of warning. They said that if our friend here was elected president, they’d leave the Union. And he was. And they did.”

“Along with Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and. . . and Virginia, too, I’ll bet!”

“What about Virginia?” Lincoln was suddenly alert. “Virginia is the key to this particular tough lock.”

Seward shrugged. “The so-called Peace Conference has been in session for two weeks now with old President Tyler—the last of the Virginians—presiding.”

“What is the mood?”

“Like that of most peace congresses—very warlike.”

“If Virginia goes. . . .” Lincoln stopped.

“There will be war,” said Washburne.

Seward said nothing; but he studied Lincoln closely for some sign of intent. The face gave nothing away. Then, almost casually, Seward said, “You know, in a way, we are well rid of those cotton republics—and their problem of slavery.”

“Where is your ‘irrepressible conflict?’” Lincoln smiled, somewhat weakly, thought Washburne; then Washburne attacked a plate of fried oysters, a delicacy unknown in his early days, and all the more to be savored at Washington City.

“Highly *repressible* if we let our erring sisters—poor foolish ladies—go in peace. Then we can turn our attention to Canada, to Mexico, to the Indies—”

“Mr. Seward, you dream of empire for a government which has just lost half its military stations to home-grown rebels.”

Seward made a gracious arabesque with his cigar. “Let the mosquitoes occupy those infernal forts. Have you ever *seen* the South?”

“I was in New Orleans once,” said Lincoln, “and,” he added with a certain grimness, “I am Kentucky-born, as the world knows.”

“A *border-state*,” said Washburne.

“A *slave border-state*,” said Lincoln.

“When I was governor of New York”—Seward was dreamy—“I used to go over to Canada every chance I could get. And you know those Canadians, the ones who speak English—the best of the lot—are eager to join our Union.”

“I seem to recall,” said Lincoln, putting down his second apple core and pushing his chair away from the table, “that on the two occasions that we invaded Canada—in the Revolution and then again in 1812—they put up quite a fight to stay *out* of our Union.”