

WASHINGTON THE WINTER BEFORE THE WAR.

LOOKING back across the graves of more than a million brave men who, on one side or the other, laid down their lives in the struggle for mastery which began in Washington in the winter of 1860-61, the recollection of the flippancy and air of lightness and almost sportiveness with which it was entered upon fills me with amazement. How great things were trifled with as if they were playthings, and great stakes were played for almost as boys play for pennies, I could not now, in the lurid light of subsequent events, ever be made to believe, had not my own eyes been the witness. Much that happened would have been impossible but for the impenetrable veil which shut out the future. What seemed to us then arrant nonsense, and scarcely to be recalled now, after thirty years, with a sober face, was in truth the manifestation of a spirit which finally made possible Andersonville, Gettysburg, and the assassination of Lincoln. I sometimes think it almost wicked to hold up the ludicrous side to the public gaze, in the light of such a terrible realization. This article is written with no such purpose, but rather to preserve, if possible, for future instruction and entertainment, the record of some incidents of those days, all trace of which will soon be beyond recall if left alone to the memory of contemporaries and participants.

One of these incidents seemed at the time a genuine burlesque; yet it covered a trap into which it would have been much easier to put a foot than to get it out when once in. Mr. Lincoln was elected President in November, 1860. Within a week after it was known, South Carolina took steps to set up her independence as a sovereign state. She did not seem to have contemplated at the outset the possibility of armed resistance to the carrying out of her scheme, but

proceeded with the formal steps of ordinary legislation, as if that alone, on her part, were sufficient to divide this nation into sections, the several parts set up into sovereignties with all the attributes of independent nationalities. It took her three weeks to get her legislature together and create a convention, which passed an ordinance in high-sounding phrase declaring South Carolina to be a free, independent, and sovereign nation among the nations of the earth, with full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do. One of the first acts of this new sovereignty was an attempt to negotiate a treaty with the United States. And so, within a month after the election, before the votes had been counted or a single step taken looking to the inauguration of Mr. Lincoln, this independent power, which had sprung up in a night, in the very midst of us, waving a foreign flag, in sight of United States forts and arsenals, over all the United States property within its limits, appointed an embassy — ministers plenipotentiary — to proceed to the government of the United States, and negotiate a treaty of peaceable surrender to her of the armed fortresses and other property of the United States found within the limits of her dominion when she woke up a sovereign. This embassy came on to Washington with a secretary of legation, and with credentials as formal and a seal as large as ever certified our minister to the Court of St. James. They took a fine house on K Street, — the rent of which it is said, they never paid, — unfurled the flag of their legation, and prepared to present their credentials, and to be received as ministers plenipotentiary of the government of South Carolina, resident, as they were

pleased to term it in true diplomatic language, near the government of the United States of America. Most people in Washington looked upon the whole proceeding as a huge joke, — as a harmless outcome of the vanity and pride of South Carolina. Not so Mr. Buchanan. The moment they presented their credentials he found himself in a dilemma. If he received them, even addressed them in the character they had put on, he would at once recognize the sovereignty they claimed to represent. If he turned them out of doors, not to say arrested them for the treason they were committing, he would immediately bring on that crisis which it was his prayer night and day might be averted till after the 4th of March. So he did neither, but referred the whole matter to Congress; and Congress referred it to a select committee, of which the writer was one. Alas! disease and death have left him alone with the knowledge of many incidents of the work of that committee, nowhere recorded, soon to become too shadowy for recital.

The committee had subsequently many other more serious matters in charge, but could never bring themselves to treat this otherwise than as a sublime farce, little dreaming of what it was the beginning. They summoned these gentlemen to appear before them, just as they would any other American citizens. Instead of appearing in person, the members of the "embassy" sent their "secretary of legation," who notified the committee, in a very courteous but exceedingly formal manner, that it had overlooked the fact — unintentionally, no doubt — that the gentlemen summoned to appear before the committee were ambassadors of a sovereign state, residing, in their diplomatic character alone, near the United States government, and acknowledging no authority but that of the government whose commission they bore. It was our first experience of this new-fledged eagle, and the bird had spread

its wings for so lofty a flight at the first opportunity that we stood back in wonder and amazement, uncertain for the moment whether it would soar into the sun or come tumbling down at our feet. We were thus suddenly brought face to face with this new sovereignty flaunting its awful attributes before us, all embodied in the person of this secretary of legation, as he supposed himself to be, and not an imposing personage at that. He was a very young man for one representing in his person the majesty of an independent government, seemingly having hardly attained his majority, with light hair, boyish face, and a mustache trained after the imperial order, rare in those days, which was a surprising success upon a face otherwise so downy. He wore patent-leather shoes and light-colored trousers in very large plaids, twirled on the tips of his fingers a cane with an apparently golden head turned over and finished in the hoof of a horse; in short, he was a dude of the dudes of that day, and fit to be the prototype of the race. Thus equipped and hat in hand, he stood before us personating the new national sovereignty which had sprung into existence out of our very selves, full-armed, like Minerva from the head of Jove. It was his first appearance in diplomacy, and he was evidently intent on making the most of it.

I was directed by the committee to examine him, and, after a few formal inquiries, I asked what had brought him to Washington. "What has brought me to Washington?" he repeated, with an air of injured surprise. "You cannot be ignorant, sir, that the new sovereign state of South Carolina has sent ambassadors to negotiate a treaty of friendship and alliance with this neighboring government of the United States, with which she is desirous of living on the most liberal terms of amity and good fellowship; and I have the honor to be the secretary of that legation, sir." As soon as the committee could recover their breath, a

further inquiry was ventured about the origin of this new government whose existence he had thus announced, and the authority under which it had been created. With a look of supreme contempt or pity for our ignorance, — one could hardly tell which, — he proceeded to enlighten us. “South Carolina,” he said, “when she consented to become one of the United States, gave up no part of her sovereignty, but only laid it away for future use whenever it seemed meet to her. She now decrees to resume it, and that is sufficient. She only puts on again the vestments of her sovereignty, as a man resumes the raiment he has temporarily laid aside.” It was so simple and easy a process that he expressed astonishment at our ignorance. A few questions more, and the committee gave up in despair the hope of getting him down to the earth, or ourselves sufficiently off from it to comprehend this sudden and absolute metamorphosis. He went on, without specific questions, to expound more at length the theory which had given birth to his government, and expatiated upon the enormity of the outrages his “people” expected would happen, and had mapped out beforehand should happen, when Lincoln should be inaugurated. He quoted Grotius and Vattel to prove that the United States forts and other public property found within the limits of South Carolina when she became an independent power became *ipso facto* her property, with the assertion that the declaration of South Carolina upon the question of her independence and sovereignty was conclusive with her, and she would tolerate no questioning it. The committee were quite overcome with his learning, and equally overawed by his defiant attitude. They looked upon this product of the new order of things as a real prodigy.

“And still they gaz’d, and still the wonder grew
That one small head could carry all he knew.”

He, however, took offense at what he considered some impertinent inquiries

put to him about the government he represented, and, gathering up its dignity and sovereignty as well as he might, took them both, with himself, out of such profane presence and back to the nursery on K Street, and the committee saw no more of him. They were never able to get the real ambassadors before them, because, it is presumed, neither Vattel nor Grotius nor any other writer on public law furnished any precedent for bringing such high public functionaries before any lesser body than the supreme authority of the state, unless it was that form of indictment which their real position would suggest. They lingered on, however, were adopted as representatives of the whole Confederacy by Jefferson Davis when he became its head, and hung about Washington under the burden of their mission and of their own importance till Sumter was fired upon, when they took their departure suddenly, with very much less ceremony and pomp than heralded their coming; in a manner, too, resembling more an escape than the leaving-taking of diplomatic representatives.

We were subsequently charged with a much more serious duty, of which little beyond our printed report was ever made public. The public mind at Washington had become greatly excited by the belief that a conspiracy had been formed to seize the Capitol and Treasury, to get possession of the archives of the government, and to prevent the counting of the electoral vote and the declaration of the election of Lincoln; thereby creating chaos and anarchy, out of which might come the establishment of the Confederacy as the government *de facto* in the very halls of the national Capitol. Treason was known to be plotting to that end in the Cabinet itself, and Mr. Buchanan was bewildered and nerveless. We were instructed to investigate the grounds for these apprehensions. Meetings were held with closed doors, and we requested that General Scott, the general of the army, be detailed to aid our investigations. Al-

ready General Cass had left the Cabinet because he would not consort with traitors, and the thoroughly loyal and terribly energetic Stanton had come into it just in time to save Buchanan, and, as many believed, the nation itself. The first struggle this great hero had was with himself. Almost at the threshold this question confronted him: Shall I obey the law which has hitherto and in ordinary times governed cabinets, and keep secret what has transpired in council, or shall I disclose and thwart the machinations of traitors wherever I see them? He obeyed the higher law, and the oath he had taken to support the Constitution. Indeed, as he told me, he had entered the Cabinet for the very purpose of saving that Cabinet from wreck; and, as it proved, it was none too soon. Calling on him the evening after he had taken the oath of office, in that anxiety which troubled all loyal men, I was assured by him in this way: "I have to-day taken an oath to support the Constitution of the United States, and by God, I will do it!"

Putting himself in communication with our committee through Mr. Seward, he more than once led us directly upon the treasonable footsteps of Floyd and Thompson, and by early disclosure made impossible the attempts of these men to turn the opportunities of their offices to the service of the enemies of their country. Of course secrecy was absolutely necessary, and the name of our informant was never attached to the papers we received. But those of the committee most in sympathy with the cause of the Union were informed where these papers could be found and where they must be returned, and of the reliability of the information they contained. Some of them were found and read by the light of the street lamp at night, and then returned to the place of deposit. Information thus derived often gave us the cue to the next day's investigations. The bold handwriting of some of these papers became very familiar to us during the war,

as our intercourse with the war office grew frequent. I remember distinctly reading one of these communications, handed me by Mr. Howard, chairman of the committee, late one night, giving information of that famous Cabinet meeting in which was disclosed the treason of Floyd in ordering the guns removed from Pittsburg to arm Southern forts, and the abstraction of a million of Indian trust funds from the custody of the government, — the Cabinet meeting at which Stanton branded Floyd a traitor, and a personal conflict was avoided only by the interference of the President. The next morning Floyd himself was called before the committee for examination. A few questions disclosed to him that the committee were in possession of the secret, and before three o'clock the news of his resignation and flight had spread through the city.

At another time the loyalty of the Secretary of the Navy, a Northern man, was suspected. The Pensacola Navy Yard and all the public property there had been surrendered to the Confederates without a blow. When this became known in the Cabinet, the hot blood of the future Secretary of War boiled over, and he denounced it as the act of a traitor or a coward. That night I read in the handwriting already familiar: "There is a Northern traitor in the Cabinet. Arrest him to-night. Pensacola has been given up. Stop him before it is too late." But the committee had no power to arrest. Power was still in hands either disloyal or paralyzed. Secretary Toucey was, however, summoned before the committee, and asked why a navy yard, with all the guns and other property in it, was surrendered to rebels without the firing of a gun. His answer sounds strangely enough in the light of the terrible carnage subsequently suffered so many times in defense of the territory and flag of the Union. "Pensacola was surrendered," he replied, "as the only means of preserving the peace."

“What!” said one of the committee, “surrendered to the enemies of the country to preserve the peace, and that without resistance! I would have fired one gun, at least, as an experiment, if nothing more.” Mr. Toucey looked up in horror, and replied: “Why, sir, you have not the slightest conception of the situation. There would certainly have been bloodshed if there had been a single gun fired. It was an interposition of Providence that the dire calamity of bloodshed was avoided.” No one thinks now that Mr. Toucey was disloyal, however suspected then, but, like Mr. Buchanan, he was dazed, and strove, at every hazard and at any cost, to postpone the conflict till after the 4th of March, when the responsibility would rest on Mr. Lincoln. He was nevertheless censured by the House of Representatives that session for acts of administration which were believed to favor the enemies of his country, and his face, among the portraits of the governors of his State, was turned to the wall for a time.

No conspiracy to prevent the counting of the electoral vote and declaring Mr. Lincoln elected was discovered in Washington, if one ever existed there. Yet the existence of one was so generally believed in, and the excitement was so great, that extraordinary precautions were taken to guard against it. The method of procedure and the lack of confidence in the loyalty of Vice-President Breckenridge, on whom alone the Constitution (as then construed) devolved the duty of counting the votes, tended greatly to increase the anxiety. The certificates of the electoral vote from each State are kept till the appointed day in two boxes in the sole custody of the Vice-President, who, on that day, with a messenger carrying the two boxes, and followed by the Senators, two and two, proceeds from the Senate Chamber, through the corridors and rotunda, always crowded and pressed upon on either side by people following to witness the ceremony, to

the House of Representatives. There, in the Speaker's chair, and in the presence of the two Houses and a crowded gallery, he opens the certificates, counts the votes, and declares the result. The ease with which desperadoes, mingling with the crowd, might fall upon the messenger as he passed through the corridors or rotunda, and violently seize the boxes, or from the galleries of the House might break up the proceedings, was apparent, and therefore armed policemen of the most reliable character, to the number of several hundred, were secretly procured from Philadelphia, New York, and other places, and, in citizens' dress, were stationed along the passageways and in the galleries, prepared for any emergency. Happily there was no occasion to call upon them. The count and declaration of Mr. Lincoln's election proceeded without interruption. We owe much to Mr. Breckenridge for the dignity and propriety of his conduct, though his heart was so thoroughly with the rebels that he was among the earliest to join their army. But the excitement and anxiety were intense from the beginning to the end of the proceeding, and the feeling of relief was almost visible in the countenances of the loyal men, oppressed as they were by knowledge of treasonable designs, all the more alarming because half hidden. The critical point in the formal proceedings was safely passed. The oath of office on the coming 4th of March was all that remained of these formalities to clothe the President elect with the insignia of the great office to which he had been called. If that formality should also be passed in safety, it would extinguish the last hope of the rebellion that it might build some claim to a *de facto* rule upon informalities or defects discovered or created in the several steps leading up from the casting of their votes by the electoral college through the different stages prescribed by the Constitution and laws to the final consummation on the eastern front of the Capitol.

Startling events and occasions of intense excitement followed one another in such quick succession that relief from one seldom brought an hour's repose. We lived in the focus of all the elements out of which were to come order or disorder, no one could tell which, — government or anarchy, peace or violence, personal security or personal peril. And so it was that hardly had the important step in the order of events — the counting of the votes and the official declaration that Mr. Lincoln was elected — been taken, and the surging tide of passion and terror partially subsided, when the unexpected and inexplicable broke over us, filling the public mind with mingled emotions of wonder, anxiety, disappointment, and disgust. Mr. Lincoln had left Springfield for Washington a week earlier, amid becoming and impressive ceremonies, and with the prayers and parting blessings of thousands who had assembled to witness his departure. His journey had been attended all along the route with the most remarkable demonstrations and manifestations of interest and regard which had ever marked the passage of a President elect from his home to the capital to assume the authority the people had conferred on him. It could not have been otherwise, for no President elect ever before journeyed on a way so beset with perils and hedged about with difficulties, or to a mission so wrapped in impenetrable mystery and so burdened with new and unmeasured responsibilities. Forty millions of people, South as well as North, had lent the most intent ear to catch every word he uttered, as the multitudes forced him to speak on the way. The words he had spoken were full of wisdom, indicated calmness of temperament and comprehension of the new and weighty responsibilities before him, and disclosed a devout reliance on a higher than human power for strength unto his day, and a self-abnegation that counted his own life of little worth in comparison

with the great work to which he had been called. The excitement and crowd increased as he journeyed, and greater preparations than ever before had been made for his reception, upon an appointed day, at the capital.

Amid all this intensity of expectation and preparation, imagine the consternation and amazement which came over every one when it was announced at the breakfast table, on the morning before the appointed day, that Mr. Lincoln was at Willard's Hotel; that he had arrived at six o'clock that morning in the New York sleeper, in company with a stranger, and had been met at the depot by only one man, his old friend Elihu B. Washburn. A hostile penny sheet turned the feeling of wonder into disappointment and disgust by fabricating the story that he came disguised in a Scotch cap and cloak. There was a sudden and painful revulsion of feeling toward him which waited for neither reason nor explanation. Never idol fell so suddenly or so far, and that while the fickle multitude was actually on its knees and vociferous in lip service. "He had sneaked into Washington." "He was a coward." "The man afraid to come through Baltimore was not fit to be President." "Frightened at his own shadow." These and worse epithets greeted this purest, bravest, wisest, and most unselfish patriot on the day he entered the capital of the nation he had come to save and to die for. And yet he had escaped as by a hair's breadth the fate which the Ruler of the universe had ordered should not overtake him till he had finished a greater work than man in his own strength had ever yet achieved. While we were searching in vain for conspirators and assassins in and about Washington, they had betaken themselves, for greater safety and more effective work, to Baltimore, and had there perfected their plans to shoot Mr. Lincoln from among the crowd gathered to greet him on his arrival at the depot, on his way to Washington, and, after mak-

ing sure and thorough work with hand grenades, to escape to Mobile in a vessel waiting for them in the harbor. While the attention of others was directed to the search about Washington for conspirators and assassins who, as all believed, were concocting their foul plot somewhere, a detective of uncommon skill was pursuing his investigations in Baltimore, unknown even to reporters; for we did not then, as now, live and move and have our being by their permission. He had become familiar with the place of meeting of the conspirators, had record of their names, — eighteen in number, — the part each was to perform, their leader, his character and nerve, and the minutest details of the plot. He laid these facts before Mr. Seward, and was sent by him, accompanied by Mr. Frederick A. Seward, to meet and lay them before Mr. Lincoln at Harrisburg. The result was that, after a reception by the legislature in the afternoon, the President elect retired to his room at six o'clock, very weary, for needed rest till the next morning, when the whole party were going by special train, by way of Philadelphia and Baltimore, to Washington. Immediately upon arriving at his room, Mr. Lincoln was taken, without the knowledge of any one at the hotel, to the depot, and the detective, having first cut the telegraphic wires, accompanied him by special train, already provided, to Philadelphia, which was reached just in time to meet a train that had been waiting fifteen minutes "for a package from the railroad office." And thus Mr. Lincoln passed through Baltimore in perfect quiet, while the conspirators were yet burnishing their weapons for his assassination on the morrow. The Washington telegraph, the next morning, was the first to announce his safe arrival there to the watching assassins in Baltimore, as well as to the waiting escort at Harrisburg.

During the war, as history has since disclosed, a desperate character was brought before the Richmond authorities

for punishment for some heinous offense, and was saved by the interposition of ex-Senator Wigfall on the ground of meritorious service as captain of this band of conspirators for the murder of Lincoln.

To refute the charge that Mr. Lincoln was hiding, and to kindle anew as soon as possible the enthusiasm which had been so suddenly and ignorantly checked, Mr. Seward hastened, without waiting for his trunk or hairbrush, to take him at once to the Capitol and present him to the Senators and Representatives, and afterwards to the people generally. On that occasion I got my first sight of this immortal hero, then only an untried and untutored Western politician. He was in a sorry plight enough when Mr. Seward escorted him into the hall. The House heard of him in the Senate Chamber, and were impatiently awaiting his arrival, with all eyes turned intently toward the door to catch the earliest possible glimpse of the future President, appearing under circumstances so novel and mysterious. I had somehow wrought out unconsciously in my own mind the great qualities of his soul and heart into a corresponding personality, and, in spite of all I had heard to the contrary, was expecting to see a god. Never did god come tumbling down more suddenly and completely than did mine, as the unkempt, ill-formed, loose-jointed, and disproportioned figure of Mr. Lincoln appeared at the door. Weary, anxious, struggling to be cheerful under a burden of trouble he must keep to himself, with thoughts far off or deep hidden, he was presented to the representatives of the nation over which he was to be placed as chief magistrate. I should like to see this scene perpetuated on canvas. It would be sure, in my opinion, to make a resting-place where this hurrying people of ours would stop and ponder. From the Representatives' hall Mr. Lincoln was taken to the balcony, and in turn introduced to the officials gathered there, and to the multitude generally. He held frequent recep-

tions for many days thereafter at Willard's Hotel. There that kindly homeliness of manner which afterwards became so prominent and attractive an element in his personality began early to overcome the dislike and break through the prejudices created by the manner of his entry into the capital. In that way, which was his own, was the multitude drawn to his room for a shake of his big hand, and for a word or sentence from his lips to think over or repeat. Everything about him — his ways not less than his looks, his methods with men not less than his speech — was so unusual and so unlike anything seen or heard before in the surroundings or utterances of a President elect at the threshold of presidential authority and responsibility that he was taken at the outset to be a mystery, and this impression was never entirely dispelled. It was, however, the mystery of his position, and not of his character. No man was more frank or unreserved where these qualities were safe, but, reserved or otherwise, he never mystified or misled. If, in those days, no man could quite comprehend him, it

was because no man could comprehend as clearly as he did what was before him. He seemed to see what was invisible to those of us who were crowding round him, and at intervals to be as one studying something which did not come within our vision or thoughts. When we came to know him better, in the days when trouble could no longer be hidden, and struggles with great problems had revealed themselves in every line of his countenance, then we understood that deep and serious look which at times passed over his face in the midst of those hand-shakings, mistaken then for absent-mindedness. Notwithstanding these peculiarities seen only in him, he won the hearts of all who came in contact with him. No one who saw Mr. Lincoln in those days has ever forgotten what he then saw and heard. The very youngest boy in the promiscuous crowd that flocked to see him at those informal receptions is a middle-aged man to-day, and all the better citizen because he remembers the good words of cheer and wisdom with which Lincoln greeted him when he took his hand.

Henry L. Dawes.

THE MEETING OF THE SHIPS.

Just aft of our beam comes the rising breeze,
 A point and a half on the starboard quarter.
 The sharp bow sheers through the long, slow seas,
 The port guy slackens, the sheet strains tauter.

Over the taffrail, fading fast,
 The land we leave lies a dim blue haze;
 The downhauls are throbbing against the mast
 To the song of the wind through shrouds and stays.

Whiter and swifter the foam-wreaths fly
 Along the lee and the eddying wake;
 Over our heads sounds the sea-gull's cry,
 The mainsail leach has a quivering shake.