

## LINCOLN'S PLACE IN TWO VIVID MEMORIES

By James L. Ford

**T**HE YEARS through which Abraham Lincoln rose from obscurity to world-wide fame were five in number, but crowded with the events that try men's souls. With dramatic suddenness he came into the eyes of the entire nation when he addressed a great audience in Cooper Union on the night of February 27, 1860. Tragically he left this world on the morning of April 15, 1865.

It has been my privilege to hear both those events described by eye-witnesses who are perhaps the only persons still living who can speak with absolute authority. Thomas Snell, of New York, was present at the Cooper Union meeting, and W. J. Ferguson, the veteran actor, stood in the wings of Ford's Theater on the night of the greatest tragedy in the history of our country and saw the assassination of the President.

Negro slavery, which had been a burning question from the early years of our history as a nation, had for some time threatened the disruption of the Union when Mr. Lincoln made his first bow before a New York audience. Ten years before, almost to the day, Daniel Webster had made his famous "Seventh of March Speech," as it is known in the annals of the controversy, in defense of the fugitive slave law, a speech that aroused the greatest antagonism throughout the length and breadth of his native New England and virtually brought his career to a close, as it deprived him of the Presidential nomination in 1852. The feeling that he had succumbed to the slave power of the South was ably voiced by the poet Whittier in his poem "Ichabod." It was not until years afterward that thoughtful Americans realized that this speech was, as one of them phrased it,

"the most important and statesmanlike document ever offered to the American people." Its effect in the South was to allay resentment against the North and postpone the inevitable conflict until the North became strong enough to win.

The country north of Mason's and Dixon's line was by no means unanimous in its opposition to slavery previous to the Civil War. New York contained a large unruly element that had no sympathy with the oppressed race, and also a wealthier group openly hostile to abolition on personal grounds, fearing that it would disrupt commerce. It was therefore an audience not altogether in sympathy with the purpose of the meeting that filled the hall of assembly to repletion when the curtain rose on the prologue of the great drama of civil war that was destined to settle forever the question of enforced servitude.

It was eminently fitting that diverse views should be represented in that audience, for Mr. Cooper had designed the hall as a forum for the unhampered expression of public opinion, which it has remained ever since, and he would have been the last man in New York, strong Abolitionist that he was, to deprive any one of the privilege of speaking his mind within those walls.

Lincoln's appearance at the meeting was due to one of those fortunate chances that so often shape the destiny of nations. His son, Robert, then an applicant for admission to Harvard College, had failed in his examinations and written the doleful news to his father, the result being that the latter made the journey to Cambridge for the purpose of aiding his son. It was while there that the invitation to speak reached him, the fame of his debates with Stephen A. Douglas having penetrated to the East, and as it would cost him but little to interrupt his journey back to Illinois, he decided to make the effort. He took the train for New York meditating on his speech and never dreaming that his words were destined to mold his own fortunes and those of the nation

There was much to occupy his mind as the train sped through the snow-clad New England country, for no man had a more complete understanding of the situation than had this Western politician whose reputation was yet to be made. He knew that the North was not then strong enough to demand emancipation but that there was a strong feeling against admitting slavery into the new territory. He knew also that Southern feeling had been aroused as never before by John Brown's futile raid at Harper's Ferry and that many of her statesmen believed Brown to have been a tool of the Republican party, and they threatened to secede from the Union if a Republican President were elected.

William Cullen Bryant, whose fame as a poet still lives, was also at this time the editor of the influential "Evening Post" and a most distinguished figure in public affairs. It was he who presided at the meeting at which Horace Greeley and other men of local renown spoke, and it was he who introduced the most far-seeing man among them in all these words:

"We shall next have the pleasure of hearing from Mr. Abraham Lincoln, of Illinois, of whom some of you have doubtless heard."

Mr. Snell, now in his eighty-seventh year and the head of a firm of house painters that was in existence when Canal Street was a canal, was at this time engaged in painting portions of the Cooper Union Building and was, therefore, able to enter the hall and secure a seat directly in front of the speakers' platform before the doors were thrown open to the multitude. The occasion lives vividly in his memory to the present day, so far as Mr. Lincoln and his speech are concerned, but he admits that even the names of the other orators have passed from his recollection. In complete sympathy with the purpose of the gathering and knowing well the temper of the rougher elements in the city's population, he was quick to note the presence of men who might be

**I**T IS a common saying that his Cooper Union speech in 1860 made Abraham Lincoln President. How poor a judge of the importance of events a contemporary press may be is shown by the fact that the Cooper Union meeting, which introduced Lincoln to the East, was "covered" by neither "Harper's" nor "Leslie's," the two illustrated news weeklies of the day. Search of the files failed to reveal as much as a mention, to say nothing of an illustration.

expected to make hostile demonstration or even start a riot should anything savoring of abolition be uttered by the speakers.

"When Abraham Lincoln stood up to speak a howl arose from the back of the hall that would have driven almost any man from the platform," said Mr. Snell to me the other day. "But he must have had a good training in his open air debates in the West, for he stood there perfectly calm, with a smile on his face, waiting for the tumult to subside. It was some time before they allowed him to go on, and when at last he got under way I pitied him, for he cut a poor figure alongside of the gentlemen on the platform. He seemed the last man in the world from whom one could expect any speech of historic importance. He was very tall and very ungainly, and his rustic-looking clothes simply hung on him instead of looking as if he had put them on. Moreover, he was no orator at all, and I have no doubt that before he had spoken many sentences the men responsible for his appearance began to doubt the wisdom of their choice. But as he went on the audience forgot his lack of personal distinction, his awkward figure and his ill-fitting clothes. The noise in the back of the hall ceased, and every one listened with keen attention. You could hear a pin drop from that time until he closed, and then there was such applause as I never listened to in my life. The people rose in their seats and cheered him, and the Democrats who had tried to howl him down came up to the edge of the platform to shake hands with him."

Mr. Lincoln's speech was in perfect accord with the sentiment of the wise men of the Republican party that a conciliatory attitude toward the South should be the keynote of the Cooper Union meeting.

"Wrong as we think slavery is," he said, "we can yet afford to let it alone where it is, because that much is due to the necessity arising from its actual presence in the nation, but can we, while our votes prevent it, allow it to spread into the national territories and to overrun us here in these free states? If our sense of duty forbids this then let us stand by our duty fearlessly and effectively. Let us be diverted by none of those statistical contrivances wherewith we are so industriously plied and belabored. . . . Neither let us be slandered from our duty by false accusations against us, nor frightened from it by menaces of destruction to the government or of dungeons to ourselves. Let us have faith that right makes right, and in that faith let us to the end dare to do our duty as we understand it."

A writer in "The New York Herald" of the following day, said to be Mr. Bennett himself, described Lincoln as "tall, thin, dark, quick in his perceptions, unsteady in his gait and with an involuntary comical awkwardness. His voice is sharp and powerful, and at times dwindles to a shrill, unpleasant sound. His delivery slow and emphatic and his face mobile." Had this chronicler possessed the gift of foresight he might have added that the speaker left the platform with the Presidential nomination in the hollow of his hand.

Probably the only person still living who was an eye-witness of the murder of Abraham Lincoln is that admirable comedian William J. Ferguson, who has a vivid recollection of every detail of the tragedy that was enacted before his eyes and whose account may safely be accepted as authoritative and final.

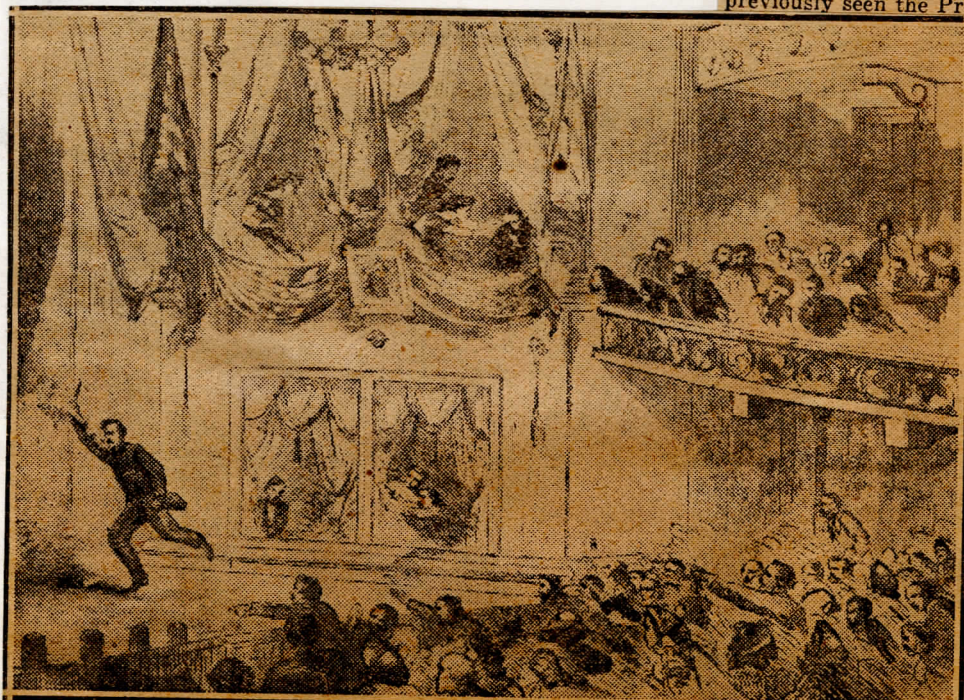
Mr. Ferguson, whose name may be found on the playbill of that fatal night, was

a very young actor cast for small parts in Laura Keene's company and serving also as the theater's call boy. It was in this last-named capacity that he called a few weeks before the night of the assassination at the house in which Lincoln afterward died, his errand being the distribution of the parts for a new play. Entering the room of one of these actors, he saw Wilkes Booth lying on the bed—the same bed on which the President later breathed his last.

On the night of the tragedy Ferguson was standing with Miss Keene in the entrance directly opposite the Presidential box, watching one of the scenes of "Our American Cousin." To his surprise, he saw Booth enter the box, saw him shoot the President and then leap to the stage, dagger in hand, and stagger on his broken leg directly toward the entrance, where, passing between the two horrified players, he made his way to the stage door.

Mr. Ferguson declares most positively that Booth uttered not a single word during his progress from the box to the entrance in which he himself stood. The "Sic semper tyrannis" myth he believes to have been created by an imaginative reporter, who felt it incumbent on him to give a final dramatic touch to the most stupendous tragedy enacted on the world's stage since the murder of Julius Cæsar. That reporter was A. R. Cazauran, who in the following decade rendered notable service to the American drama as the chief lieutenant of A. M. Palmer, of the Union Square Theater.

After the removal of Lincoln to the house over the way Ferguson obtained admission also through his friendship with the son of the proprietor, made his way upstairs and there saw Abraham Lincoln dying on the same bed on which he had previously seen the President's assassin.



*Booth escaping across the stage of Ford's Theater after his leap from the President's box*