

CHAPTER 4.

"Lincoln's premonitions of Death."

(Furnish illustrations.)

## LINCOLN'S PREMONITIONS OF DEATH

### Warned of Assassination, Lincoln Dreamed of It

Did President Lincoln, in the weeks preceding April 14, 1865, have premonitions that his ship of destiny was about to set sail for unknown seas? One of his friends<sup>1</sup> states that from early youth, Mr. Lincoln had a presentiment that he would die a violent death, or, rather, that his final days would be marked by some great tragic event. Lincoln was a mystic, and was warned by so many to guard against assassination that it was often in his mind, which may explain his sometimes dreaming of it.

In many ways he was also a fatalist and refused consciously to worry about the time or manner of his death, yet the deep impression made on his subconscious mind by reading in his mail and hearing from friends almost daily that his assassination or abduction was being plotted had its effect, and when the gates of subconsciousness had been opened by sleep, out rushed these foreboding dreams. While neither Mr. Lincoln nor Mrs. Lincoln believed in dreams, they were both much impressed and haunted by some of the President's.<sup>2</sup> "It seems strange how much there is in the Bible about dreams," Mr. Lincoln was once heard to remark.

Just after his election in 1860, according to a story he told his secretary, John Hay, he was "tired out" with the excitement created by receiving the election returns and went home to rest, throwing himself upon a lounge in his room.

"Opposite to where I lay," said the President, "was a bureau with a swinging glass upon it; and, in looking in that glass, I saw myself reflected nearly at full length; but my face, I noticed, had two separate and distinct

images, the tip of the nose of one being about three inches from the tip of the other. I was a little bothered, perhaps startled, and got up and looked in the glass; but the illusion vanished. On lying down again, I saw it a second time, plainer, if possible, than before; and then I noticed that one of the faces was a little paler---say five shades---than the other. I got up, and the thing melted away; and I went off, and in the excitement of the hour forgot all about it--nearly, but not quite, for the thing would once in a while come up, and give me a little pang, as though something uncomfortable had happened.

"When I went home, I told my wife about it; and a few days after I tried the experiment again, when, sure enough, the thing came back again; but I never succeeded in bringing the ghost back after that, though I once tried very industriously to show it to my wife, who was worried about it somewhat. She thought it was 'a sign' that I was to be elected to a second term of office, and that the paleness of one of the faces was an omen that I should not see life through the last term."<sup>3</sup>

The White House has always been a magnet for crank reformers and paranoiacs of all types, and it is doubtful that there has ever been a President whose assassination was not threatened or attempted by some insane person. Mr. Lincoln had lived face to face with possible assassination since his first entrance into Washington as head of the nation for soon after his election, threats were made that he would never be permitted to take the oath of office<sup>4</sup> and on his way to Washington in February, 1861, for his first inauguration, he and his friends were warned at Philadelphia by Allan Pinkerton, then head of the secret service, that there was a plot to assassinate the President-elect when he reached Baltimore.

The leader in the assassination conspiracy was an Italian fanatic, Fernandino, formerly a barber at Barnum's Hotel, Baltimore, who advocated the assassination of Lincoln to prevent abolition and had gathered around him a circle of secessionist enthusiasts. The plot was discovered by secret service agents, who reported that Fernandino was willing to take any chances to kill Mr. Lincoln and had extravagantly stated, "I am destined to die, shrouded with glory, I shall immortalize myself by plunging a knife into Lincoln's heart." The deed was to be committed at the Calvert street railway station in Baltimore as Mr. Lincoln passed through.

Mr. Lincoln was told about the plot and induced secretly to change his plans so as to travel incognito through Baltimore in the middle of the night and on a different train than he originally intended. (Allan Pinkerton denies (p. 102) the truth of a story that has gained much currency that Mr. Lincoln was disguised in a Scotch cap and plaid.) The conspirators, warned by the news of the President's safe arrival in Washington, sought safety in flight and were not apprehended. Mr. Lincoln always regretted his "secret passage" to Washington, for it was repugnant to a man of his high courage. He had agreed to the plan simply because all of his friends urged it as the best thing to do.<sup>5</sup>

Beginning with this plot Mr. Lincoln, according to his secretaries, Nicolay and Hay, was constantly subject to the threats of his enemies and the warnings of his friends.

"The threats came in every form; his mail was infested with brutal and vulgar menace, mostly anonymous, the expression of vile and cowardly minds. The warnings, not less numerous, were faithfully reported to him by zealous or nervous friends. Most of these communications received no notice.

"In cases where there seemed a ground for inquiry it was made, as carefully as possible, by the President's private secretary and by the War Department, but always without substantial result. Warnings that appeared to be most definite when they came to be examined proved too vague and confused for further attention. The President was too intelligent not to know he was in some danger. Madmen frequently made their way to the very door of the executive offices and sometimes into Mr. Lincoln's presence.<sup>6</sup>

"Although he freely discussed with the officials about him the possibilities of danger, he always considered them remote, as is the habit of men constitutionally brave, and positively refused to torment himself with precautions for his own safety. He would sum the matter up by saying that both friends and strangers must have daily access to him in all manner of ways and places; his life was therefore in reach of any one, sane or mad, who was ready to murder and be hanged for it; that he could not possibly guard against all danger unless he were to shut himself up in an iron box, in which condition he could scarcely perform the duties of a President; by the hand of a murderer he could die only once; to go continually in fear would be to die over and over."<sup>7</sup>

John Bigelow, Lincoln's second minister to France, stated in 1865 that he had three years before warned the Secretary of State of plots against the lives of northern statesmen, but that Mr. Seward deprecated the idea in the following terms:

"There is no doubt that from a period anterior to the breaking out of the insurrection, plots and conspiracies for purposes of assassination have been frequently formed and organized. And it is not unlikely that

such an one as has been reported to you is now in agitation among the insurgents. If it be so, it need furnish no ground for anxiety. Assassination is not an American practice or habit, and one so vicious and so desperate cannot be engrafted into our political system. This conviction of mine has steadily gained strength since the Civil War began. Every day's experience confirms it. The President, during the heated season, occupies a country house near the Soldiers Home, two or three miles from the city. He goes to and from that place on horseback, night and morning, unguarded. I go there unattended at all hours, by daylight and moonlight, by starlight and without any light."<sup>8</sup>

According to Ward Lamon, marshal of the District of Columbia,<sup>9</sup> Mr. Lincoln made the Soldiers Home about three miles northwest of the White House his summer residence, but refused to have a military escort to and from this place saying that there wasn't the slightest occasion for such precaution. One morning, however, in August, 1862, the President reported that the night before, about 11 o'clock, when riding his horse alone on his way to the Home and near the entrance to the grounds, he was startled by the report of a rifle seemingly about fifty yards away which frightened the horse to such an extent that he finished the distance at breakneck speed. The President refused to believe that he was the target, although he acknowledged that he heard the bullet whistle near his head.

November 1, 1864, the United States Consul at Halifax wrote the Secretary of State as follows: "It is secretly asserted by secessionists here that plans have been formed and will be carried into execution by the rebels and their allies, for setting fire to the principal cities in the Northern States on the day of the Presidential Election."<sup>10</sup>

David Homer Bates, in charge of the War Department telegraph, says that vague rumors of a plot to kidnap or assassinate the President had previously reached the War Department, but had been given little credence until just about this time a photograph of Lincoln had been received by Mrs. Lincoln through the mail which showed red ink-spots on the shirt front, with a rope around the neck.

Ward Lamon, marshal of the District, became so distressed in December, 1864, at what seemed to him Mr. Lincoln's carelessness, that at 1:30 in the morning he wrote the President as follows:

"I regret that you do not appreciate what I have repeatedly said to you in regard to the proper police arrangements connected with your household and your own personal safety. You are in danger. I have nothing to ask, and I flatter myself that you will at least believe that I am honest. If, however, you have been impressed differently, do me and the country the justice to dispose at once of all suspected officers, and accept my resignation of the marshalship.

"I will give you further reasons which have impelled me to this course. Tonight, as you have done on several previous occasions, you went unattended to the theater. When I say unattended, I mean that you went alone with Charles Sumner and a foreign minister, neither of whom could defend himself against an assault from any able-bodied woman in this city. And you know, or ought to know, your life is sought after, and will be taken unless you and your friends are cautious."

During the last weeks of the war, President Lincoln saw Petersburg fall into the hands of Union troops. A few days later he entered Richmond. It was during this trip that Mrs. Lincoln says that she was driving one day with her husband along the banks of the James, when they

passed a country graveyard. "It was a retired place, shaded by trees, and early spring flowers were opening on nearly every grave. It was so quiet and attractive that they stopped the carriage and walked through it. Mr. Lincoln seemed thoughtful and impressed. He said, 'Mary, you are younger than I. You will survive me. When I am gone, lay my remains in some quiet place like this'."<sup>11</sup>

On the return trip from Richmond to Washington, members of the party were much impressed by the tone and manner in which Mr. Lincoln read aloud, two or threetimes, a passage from Macbeth:

" . . . Duncan is in his grave;  
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well;  
Treason has done his worst; nor steel,  
nor poison.  
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing,  
Can touch him further."

Possibly the most startling and gruesome of Mr. Lincoln's many dreams was one he had a few weeks before April 14, 1865, which so haunted him that after working ten days he reluctantly told Mrs. Lincoln and two or three others who were present. Later he referred to it in conversation with others.

About ten days ago," said Mr. Lincoln, "I retired very late. I had been waiting for important dispatches from the front. I could not have been long in bed when I fell into a slumber, for I was weary. I soon began to dream. There seemed to be a deathlike stillness about me. Then I heard subdued sobs, as if a number of people were weeping. I thought I left my bed and wandered downstairs. There the silence was broken by the same pitiful sobbing, but the mourners were invisible. I went from room to room; no living person was in sight, but the same mournful sounds



of distress met me as I passed along. It was light in all the rooms, every object was familiar to me; but where were all the people who were grieving as if their hearts would break? I was puzzled and alarmed. What could be the meaning of all this?

"Determined to find the cause of a state of things so mysterious and so shocking, I kept on until I arrived at the East Room, which I entered. There I met with a sickening surprise. Before me was a catafalque, on which rested a corpse wrapped in funeral vestments. Around it were stationed soldiers who were acting as guards; and there was a throng of people, some gazing mournfully upon the corpse, whose face was covered, others weeping pitifully. 'Who is dead in the White House?' I demanded of one of the soldiers. 'The President,' was his answer; 'he was killed by an assassin!' Then came a loud burst of grief from the crowd, which awoke me from my dream. I slept no more that night; and although it was only a dream I have been strangely annoyed by it ever since."<sup>12</sup>

"Never since he had become convinced that the end of the war was near had Mr. Lincoln seemed to his friends more glad, more serene, than on the 14th of April. The morning was soft and sunny in Washington, and as the spring was early in 1865, the Judas-trees and the dogwood were blossoming on the hillsides, the willows were green along the Potomac, and in the parks and gardens the lilacs bloomed---a day of promise and joy to which the whole town responded. Indeed, ever since the news of the fall of Richmond reached Washington the town had been indulging in an almost unbroken celebration, each new victory arousing a fresh outburst and rekindling enthusiasm. On the night of the 13th, there had been a splendid illumination, and on the 14th, the rejoicing went on. The suspension of the draft

and the presence of Grant in town---come this time not to plan new campaigns, but to talk of peace and reconstruction--seemed to furnish special reason for celebrating."<sup>13</sup>

"The day was one of unusual enjoyment to Mr. Lincoln. His son, Robert, had returned from the field with General Grant, and the President spent an hour with the young captain in delighted conversation over the campaign. He denied himself generally to the throng of visitors, admitting only a few friends."<sup>14</sup>

During the morning of the fourteenth, Mrs. Lincoln had accepted for herself and the President an invitation to attend a performance of Our American Cousin at Ford's Theater that night and had invited the Grants to be their guests. General and Mrs. Grant had not seen their children for some time and answered that if possible they wanted to take an afternoon train to Burlington, New Jersey, where the children were in school, but that if they remained in Washington for the night, they would gladly accept the invitation.

One of President Lincoln's last letters, written on the morning of April 14, was to General Van Allen who had written "requesting him for the sake of his friends and the nation to guard his life and not expose it to assassination as he had by going to Richmond." Mr. Lincoln answered, "I intend to adopt the advice of my friends and use due precaution."<sup>15</sup>

At the last presidential cabinet meeting at 11 o'clock on the morning of April 14, "The conversation turning upon the subject of sleep, Mr. Lincoln remarked that a peculiar dream of the previous night was one that had recurred several times in his life--- a vague sense of floating---floating away on some vast and indistinct expanse, toward an unknown shore. The dream itself was not so strange as the coincidence, that each of the previous recurrences had been followed by some important event or disaster.

"The usual comments were made by his auditors. One thought it was merely a matter of coincidences.

"Another laughingly remarked: 'At any rate it cannot presage a victory nor a defeat this time, for the war is over.'

"A third suggested: 'Perhaps at each of these periods there were possibilities of great change or disaster; and the vague feeling of uncertainty may have led to the dim vision in sleep.'

"Perhaps, said Mr. Lincoln, thoughtfully, 'perhaps that is the explanation.'"<sup>16</sup>

After the Cabinet meeting, the President took a drive with Mrs. Lincoln, expressing a wish that no one should accompany them. His heart was filled with a solemn joy, which awoke memories of the past to mingle with hopes for the future; and in this subdued moment he desired to be alone with the one who stood nearest to him in human relationship. In the course of their talk together, he said: "Mary, we have had a hard time of it since we came to Washington; but the war is over and with God's blessing we may hope for four years of peace and happiness, and then we will go back to Illinois and pass the rest of our lives in quiet."<sup>17</sup>

According to Colonel William H. Crook, one of the President's bodyguards, he accompanied the President during the afternoon of April 14 to the War Department. He stated that the President was unusually depressed and expressed his belief that he would be assassinated, but that if it were to be done, it would be impossible to prevent it, later adding that he would not attend the theater that night but for the fact that he was expected and his absence would disappoint the people.<sup>18</sup>

David Homer Bates claims, in Lincoln in the Telegraph Office, "that Stanton, the Secretary of War, having in mind the numerous threats of assassination which had come to his notice through secret service agents and otherwise, on the morning of the fourteenth, urged the President (p. 366) not to attend the theater that night."

To Mrs. Lincoln who suggested to the President that they decline the invitation to attend the theater that evening he answered that it was necessary for him to have a little rest, and by going to the theater he would escape the crowds of "overjoyed, excited people" who would visit him if he remained at the White House.<sup>19</sup>

General Grant, between one and two o'clock in the afternoon, having remained after the Cabinet meeting, was urged by the President to attend the theater with them that night, but Grant refused saying that he and Mrs. Grant had made arrangements to visit their children, and that Mrs. Grant was "desirous of leaving the city on the four o'clock train."<sup>20</sup>

After dinner that evening Lincoln told Noah Brooks, a newspaper correspondent who had called, that when Grant had decided not to stay and attend the theater, he "felt inclined to give up the whole thing."<sup>21</sup>

Colonel McClure, a friend of the President, says that probably one reason Mr. Lincoln did not particularly care to go to the theater that night was a sort of half-promise he had made to his friend and bodyguard, Marshal Lamson. Two days previously he had sent Lamson to Richmond on business connected with a call for a convention on reconstruction. Before leaving, Mr. Lamson saw Mr. Usher, the Secretary of the Interior and asked him to persuade Mr. Lincoln to use more caution about his personal safety and to go out as little as possible while Lamson was absent. Together they went to see Mr. Lincoln, and Lamson requested the President

to make him a promise.

"I think I can venture to say I will," agreed Mr. Lincoln. "What is it?"

"Promise me that you will not go out after night while I am gone," demanded Mr. Lamon, "Particularly to the theater."

Mr. Lincoln turned to Mr. Usher and said, "Usher, this boy is a monomaniac on the subject of my safety. I can hear him or hear of his being around at all times in the night, to prevent somebody from murdering me. He thinks I shall be killed, and we think he is going crazy. What does any one want to assassinate me for? If any one wants to do so, he can do it any day or night if he is ready to give his life for mine. It's nonsense."

Mr. Usher advised Mr. Lincoln that it would be well to heed Lamon's warning, as he was thrown among persons from whom he had better opportunities to learn about such matters than almost any one.

"Well," said Mr. Lincoln to Lamon, "I promise to do the best I can."<sup>22</sup>

That from Abraham Lincoln the war had exacted a terrible toll in mental anguish, no matter how much he tried not to worry about its awful problems, is shown by the startling contrast between pictures taken of him in 1861, 1863, and 1865 and two life masks made of him, one in 1860, the other in the spring of 1865. St. Gaudens insisted at first that the second was a death mask. "The lines are set as if the living face, like the copy, had been in bronze; the nose is thin and lengthened by the emaciation of the cheeks; the mouth is fixed like that of an archaic statue---a look as of one on whom sorrow and care had done their worst

without victory is on all the features; the whole expression is of unspeakable sadness and all-suffering strength."<sup>23</sup>

In view of the President's many weird dreams and seeming premonitions it is not strange that "The Dream" by Lord Byron was among his favorite poems. To Ward Lamon<sup>24</sup> he often repeated:

"Sleep hath its own world,  
A boundary between the things misnamed  
Death and existence: Sleep hath its own world  
And a wide realm of wild reality.  
And dreams in their development have breath,  
And tears and tortures, and the touch of joy;  
They leave a weight upon our waking thoughts,  
They take a weight from off our waking toils,  
They do divide our being."

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