

A CONFEDERATE SPY.

A Story of the CIVIL WAR.

— BY —

Captain Thomas N. Conrad.

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CHAPTER XIII.

SEPTEMBER of 1864 had dawned upon the battling armies far down along the Chickahominy and palpably the military power of the South was on the wane. Stand after stand was the Confederate chieftain making, only to find a day or two later that his stand was untenable. Those Northern soldiers seemed like myriads of sea-sands suddenly transformed into giants and then sent dashing against the "rebel" ranks. Well fed, well clothed and paid for service, the conditions on the one hand! Half-starved, in rags and no hope of better things on the other! Even in weapons and ammunition an unequal contest, and the end seemed near at hand. Fresh armies to aid the Confederate cause could no longer be expected. The flower of the South, almost to the last man, had already been under arms for years and what help there was for the situation must come from within. Without all was blackness and despair. One shrewd move, a skillful capture of somebody high in Federal authority, and the advantage then gained might equalize the struggle. Why was it not possible to capture Lincoln himself, take him into Confederate lines and hold the Northern president as a hostage for peace? If such a plan were successful, there could be no doubt that the war would be at an end in a few weeks and who could tell, but that the South might gain in the treaty much, if not all, that had been left to the arbitrament of arms during the past three-and-a-half years.

That was the way we mused then, but in what a different light matters appear now! Even had we succeeded in capturing Mr. Lincoln or any two or three members of his cabinet besides, a child could conclude in the light of subsequent events that the move would have accomplished no tan-

gible good to the Confederacy. The scheme was nothing more than a wild, visionary longing "to do something," anything which had about it a ray of promise for future results; but at that time it was big with hope anyway, and full of enthusiasm, I started from Richmond on the kidnapping expedition.

I was not unmindful of the fact that a thousand dangers and difficulties lurked in the way and that similar excursions had always come to naught. At different times during the war schemes for capturing Mr. Lincoln and taking him to Richmond as a prisoner, had been planned more than once, and some of Mosby's men, who conceived the idea, were the ring-leaders. But plans invariably miscarried from different causes and an open attempt was never made. Here I desire to say, that to the best of my knowledge and belief President Davis and his cabinet were never cognizant of these schemes to capture Mr. Lincoln; in fact, the only time the subject was ever broached to the Confederate President he expressed his disapproval so strongly that to this more than anything was due the abandonment of the scheme. This happened when an attempt was about to be made by Mosby's men directly after the Gettysburg campaign and the facts of the case were told me by Secretary of War Sedden, when I asked his assistance to further my especial project, which had its origin among a few South Carolina officers in Hampton's cavalry and with whom I was accustomed to fraternize when in camp.

Neither was the Confederate cabinet officially—or otherwise as far as I know—informed of the latest scheme to kidnap. Mr. Sedden was perhaps the only member directly cognizant of it and even he was opposed to the move at first. On my representations, however, he finally gave his consent to the measure as perfectly justifiable in war times, but with the stipulation that no violence should be used in any event. We must endeavor to effect the capture at our own risk, he said, and any unnecessary acts of ugliness on our part would have

been visited with severe punishment from the Confederate authorities, if we ever managed to get outside of Yankee lines with whole heads.

Two associates,—Mountjoy Cloud and Norton, the latter of whom was already in Federal employ as a detective—and myself, determined to accomplish the plan, if possible and with this in view commenced the arrangements, to which Mr. Sedden, was now willing to lend a hand. I knew well, that if we succeeded, rapid transportation of the captive was necessary and the situation would certainly call for the promptest co-operation. Mr. Sedden was therefore requested to furnish me with an order on Colonel Mosby for assistance, should I need it, and whatever aid could be rendered by Lieutenant Cawood, the gallant young officer, who had charge of the Confederate signal station on the Lower Potomac. The secretary never hesitated, but at once issued the following:

CONFEDERATE STATES OF AMERICA. WAR DEPARTMENT.
RICHMOND, VA., Sept. 15, 1864.

Lt. Col. Mosby and Lieut. Cawood are hereby directed to aid and facilitate the movements of Capt. Conrad.

JAMES A. SEDDEN,
Secretary of War.

This was the order that laid the train and prepared my way to accomplish something, which history records nothing about, because it failed of execution. Had that little detail of three men succeeded in their purpose, we should have unmade history, and who can tell? Perhaps the dark tragedy at Ford's Theatre would never have been known; and who is prophet enough to judge what might have been the turn of political events; and what new nations might not now exist on this continent, had Lincoln ever been taken across the Potomac unwillingly? The question affords an immense field for speculation, that will never see realization, but it is a vastly interesting matter for the thoughtful to contemplate in passing, nevertheless. Mosby was never informed of the contents of the

order, which I carried from Mr. Sedden, nor was Lieutenant Cawood until long after the scheme's failure. We had determined that a too premature disclosure might somehow lead to discovery of the plan among Federal authorities and thwart it, and besides for a day after the proposed capture we had no doubt of being able to attend to the affair without additional aid. So being assured that none of our party ever divulged what had been planned, I could never get an inkling of the real truth—why and under what circumstances Mr. Lincoln received warning in time—until a comparatively recent date. But the reasons will appear and the thwarting of our plan prove to have been due to an entirely different scheme from our own.

Ten days after securing the order for the War Department at Richmond, I had reached Washington safely and began to reconnoitre the White House. To capture a man like the President of the United States, would be no easy task at any time and much less so when the capital where he resided was thronged with foes, a fact he knew well; and no man could tell when a hostile move in the dark night came. I had to ascertain Mr. Lincoln's customary movements first; then plan accordingly afterwards, Lafayette Square, only a stone's throw North of the White House entrance, was the very place I needed as vantage ground. Partially concealed by the large trees of the park, I found no difficulty in observing the official's ingress and egress; noting about what hours of the day he might venture forth; size of the accompanying escort, if any; and all other details, to be thoroughly informed about which, would have no stone unturned, to possibly foil our attempt.

Lafayette Square was always a favorite resort in summer for Washington and my presence there at any hour of the day excited no comment or suspicion. I had company in plenty. Being already acquainted with the fact that Mr. Lincoln made the Soldier's Home on the Northern outskirts of the city his

summer residence, I had only to discover when he left the White House ; how long he was accustomed to stay ; and the route he took in riding or driving. Hours and days of watching were necessary before I learned that he usually left the President's quarters in the cool of the evening on pleasant days, driving and accompanied in his private carriage, straight out Fourteenth Street to Columbia Road ; then across to the high elevation, which is now the largest and one of the finest reservations in Washington.

Then came the tug of war. We had to determine at what point it would be most expedient to capture the carriage and take possession of Mr. Lincoln ; and then whether to move with him through Maryland to the Lower Potomac and cross, or to the Upper Potomac and deliver the prisoner to "Mosby's Confederacy" for transportation to Richmond. To secure the points necessary for reaching a proper conclusion about all these things, required days of careful work and observation. Were the chances of our being intercepted by one route less than by the other ? And once that point settled, could we reach the Confederate lines more quickly than along any other course ? Having scouted the country pretty thoroughly and leaving all that was thought necessary were finally concluded to take the Lower Potomac route and were about ready for the attempt. This was to be the programme :

Two of our number, Norton and myself, were to be well mounted and armed, and follow the President's carriage from the moment it turned into Fourteenth Street until a point was reached on the Columbia Road, where the drive ran along between the trees of a dense wood, just outside of the Soldier's Home grounds and a short distance to the West. The third member of the party, Cloud, was to drive a close vehicle in our rear, keeping well up, and by the time the designated spot was reached, the coming darkness, we thought, would aid the work in preventing our movements from being observed. It was all planned out to the last detail and the minute the driver

of Mr. Lincoln's equipage passed into the forest, he should be made to stop by means of a pistol at his head, and Mr. Lincoln, served in a similar manner, would be compelled to cross from his carriage to the close vehicle. Our third man in the capacity of coachman, was then to drive with all possible speed along the country roads through Maryland and to the point on the East shore of the Potomac, where it would be an easy matter to signal Lieutenant Cawood and his men and conduct the captured hostage through our lines to Richmond. By driving around the North of Washington, so as to avoid crossing the Navy Yard bridge, where capture of the expedition would have been a foregone conclusion, we could see no special obstacle and in less than twenty-four hours we should have our prize safely across the disputed territory. As the president's driver and carriage were to have been detained by Norton and myself during the night, no other difficulty interposed. Mr. Lincoln bound and gagged in the close vehicle would have been safe enough from causing trouble and as his own carriage was not expected at the White House until morning, and its non-arrival at the Soldier's Home would have awakened no inquiry, we felt secure in the belief that the author of the Emancipation Proclamation was almost as good as in our hands.

Everything was now arranged and a Saturday afternoon fixed upon as the time. We must still be on the alert, though, and keep track of any possible new developments. So my old seat in Lafayette Square again came into use and quite steadily, too. Everyday I eagerly watched the White House to see whether the President still continued his lonesome drives and could be reasonably counted upon to meet us on Saturday. Not an obstacle appeared so far and we were nerving ourselves for the ordeal to come on the morrow, when imagine our surprise that Friday afternoon, as the President's carriage came moving out of the grounds of the White House and a squad of Federal cavalry galloped up and surrounded the equipage as

escort. The new wrinkle struck us all of a heap and on recovering from the shock, the first question naturally was: "How came this scheme to be discovered?"

On the following morning a paragraph appeared in a city paper stating that it had been learned by the authorities that an attempt to kidnap the President was in contemplation, for which reason a cavalry escort was detailed to guard him safely to and from his summer home. This move, as I remember, attracted much attention in the North at the time and was severely criticized by public journals, unfriendly to Lincoln. But the particular reason therefore was never made public and for years I was unable to enlighten myself regarding the publication in that Washington paper. I was positive none of our trio divulged the plan, we had formulated and the only solution of the mystery seeming at all possible was that others at the very same time were making the identical arrangements, we were, and some one of their number had betrayed the secret.

Of course the cavalry escort defeated our object and the wise precaution of somebody prevented Mr. Lincoln's being kidnapped. That somebody, as I now know, was Colonel Baker, of the Government Detective Bureau and the solution of the mystery, which I bit upon then, seems to have been the correct one, as I have since learned from Colonel W. H. Crook, who was at the time an executive clerk in the White House and has held the position continuously through all the line of presidents, from Lincoln's first term. Again it was my bold comrade-in-arms, Colonel Mosby—or at least some of his men,—who proved responsible for the unsuccessful termination of our expedition. A half dozen of those daring riders had secretly made their way into Washington, with the avowed purpose of capturing Mr. Lincoln themselves, regardless of any other schemes on the same head, and perhaps not dreaming that anybody else had the nerve and effrontery to attempt such a thing. Their plan was to take Mr. Lincoln prisoner about the same time and place, we had determined

upon and then spirit him in a close carriage to the old Van Ness house after dark. From there it ought to be a comparatively easy matter to get across the Potomac in a row-boat and make tracks for Mosby's stamping ground at the head of the Shenandoah Valley.

But the blandishments of John Barleycorn were more than those thirsty warriors in butternut could withstand. The bar at Brown's Hotel, now the Metropolitan, on Pennsylvania avenue speedily became their headquarters and a generous quantity of genuine Virginia distilled corn was theirs also. The latter article was as non-conducive to keeping secrets then as now and one of the secret men, swarming over the city had soon found an inkling of what those fellows were whispering about. The cavalymen managed to get out of town safely after concluding that the scheme was not practical, but the detective's report of the matter to Colonel Baker, Colonel Crook says, led to the escort in question being ordered the next day and Lincoln was saved only to be assassinated six months later. These seem to be the actual facts of the case and the story which gained circulation after Mr. Lincoln's death—that Booth and his fellow conspirators were the men at that time planning a kidnapper's work—appears to have as little foundation as the dozen other yarns in the same connection. In fact Booth was never shown to have contemplated the capture or assassination until the winter following our unsuccessful job and there is every reason to believe no evidence in that direction was produced simply because there was none.

In bitter disappointment at the failure to carry out what had been so carefully planned, I could only hope for better things and still keep an eye open for any chance information about Washington and sent it to Richmond by the "Doctor's Line." It was as much service as I could render the Confederacy anywhere and with the revival of courage came another new scheme, almost as daring as the previous one, but perhaps a hundred times more impracticable. Still if it proved success-