

# Lincoln's Last Story *By Charles T. White*

**D**AVID HOMER BATES, secretary of the United States Military Telegraph Corps, during the four years of the Civil War cipher code operator and manager of the War Department telegraph office, author of "Lincoln in the Telegraph Office," says the last story told by Abraham Lincoln was during the Cabinet meeting at midday on April 14, 1865, his assassination occurring the same evening at Ford's Theater.

"At each recurring Lincoln anniversary our thoughts easily revert to colorful episodes in the life of the great emancipator," said Mr. Bates yesterday. "While it is almost a truism that Lincoln was too busy to joke, still it is true that even when the clouds were blackest he would relax into a light vein of talk.

"He spent more of his working hours during the four years of the Civil War in the War Department telegraph office than anywhere else except the White House. As he himself stated more than once, indulging in a jest was a sort of life-saving thing to him.

"But after the collapse, or the evident collapse, of the Confederacy, and especially after Appomattox, he was delightfully jovial, radiating sunshine whenever he came into the War Department telegraph office, where he spent literally hours at a stretch when battles were on or impending, waiting for news from Grant, Sherman, Meade, Sheridan or Thomas.

"At the last Cabinet meeting, following an interchange of views over certain departmental matters, there came up for discussion something all were interested in—namely, the disposition of Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy, who, it was hoped

and expected, would soon be a prisoner of war in the custody of our troops on Southern soil.

"There were all sorts of suggestions. One Cabinet member thought hanging was none too severe. Another wanted him locked up for a term of years. Each member of the Cabinet voiced his judgment. There was intense curiosity about the President's views. Previously in a private conversation he had suggested to Assistant Secretary of War Charles A. Dana, afterward editor of 'The New York Sun,' who had asked him about the disposition of Jacob Thompson, Secretary of War in Davis's Cabinet, arrested at Portland, Me., in trying to reach Canada, that—to use his own words:

"When you have got an elephant by the hind leg and he is trying to run away, it's best to let him run."

"Lincoln listened to every one, and when it came time for him to speak his face took on a quizzical expression, a signal that something out of the ordinary was coming, and then he said:

"What to do with Jefferson Davis reminds me of an Irishman in Springfield, Ill., who during a temperance wave signed a total abstinence pledge. He withstood all pressure to get him to break his pledge. On one extraordinary occasion when all the others were drinking and when his friends bore on harder than ever Pat said: 'I'll not break me pledge, but if some one should put some whisky in me glass of water unbeknownst-like to me, sure I'd be all the happier.'"

"And so," said Lincoln, "if it could be managed that Davis could escape unbeknownst-like to the government, it might be a happy solution of the matter."