

The Literary Digest for September 14, 1929

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MYTHS THAT HAVE GROWN ABOUT LINCOLN



THE APRIL AIR GREW KEEN just over the New York Central railroad tracks, but on either side of the roadbed it was warm, according to a story that was to grow into a legend. Every watchman along the right-of-way, the tale runs on, slipped off the track and sat down at the side to see what would happen. Soon came the pilot engine of the ghost train, flying long black streamers. It carried a band of black instruments, playing dirges. Grinning skeletons sat all about. Then the funeral train itself, with flags and streamers, rushed past. The track seemed covered with black carpet. The coffin was visible in its car, and on still another train that followed were vast numbers of blue-coated men with coffins on their backs. It was the ghost of the train that carried the body of Abraham Lincoln back to Springfield, Illinois, for burial, passing again over its route. The specter, it was once said, appeared every year in the month of April. And that was but one of many fantastic stories that grew up about Abraham Lincoln, we learn from Lloyd Lewis in "Myths After Lincoln" (Harcourt, Brace). Mr. Lewis quotes the story of the ghost train from the *Albany Evening Times*.

Some of the Lincoln myths cited by the author seem to have a basis in fact, but even these, with the passage of time, have taken on a legendary nature. Lincoln, for example, on excellent authority, has been credited with prophetic dreams. This incident, cited by Mr. Lewis, is supposed to have occurred at a Cabinet meeting on the very day of his assassination:

Long-legged Lincoln eased back in his White House chair and talked informally—the meeting had not yet begun, since it must wait upon Stanton, Secretary of War, who was still bustling around the telegraph office. General Grant, who had come up from Appomattox to be Lincoln's guest at the Cabinet conference, was as solemn in victory as in battle, and told Lincoln that he was anxious about Sherman, away down in North Carolina there, face to face with General Johnston and the remaining "rebel" army. At this Lincoln spoke up, saying that things would be all right. He had had a sign.

All of the dignitaries in the room remembered later what it was that Lincoln then went on to say, altho some recalled the words a little differently from others. Some remembered that he had been very grave as he spoke, others that he had been sad, still others noted nothing unusual. Secretary of the Navy Welles, less superstitious than most men of his time, and with a memory always alert to catch the significant happenings which might be jotted down in his voluminous diary, remembered Lincoln's words like this:

"I have no doubt that favorable news will soon come, for I had, last night, my usual dream that has preceded nearly every important event of the war. I seemed to be in a singular and indescribable vessel, and to be moving with great rapidity toward a dark and indefinite shore."

As the Secretaries and the General watched, the long man talked on:

"I have had this singular dream preceding the firing on Sumter, the battles of Bull Run, Antietam, Gettysburg, Stone River [otherwise known as Murfreesboro], Vicksburg, Wilmington, and so on.

"Victory has not always followed my dream, but the event and the results have been important. I have no doubt that a battle has taken place or is about to be fought, and Johnston will be beaten, for I had this strange dream again last night. It must relate to Sherman; my thoughts are in that direction, and I know of no other important event which is likely just now to occur."

One Middle Westerner who had followed Lincoln to Washington, came forward, after the assassination, "to intensify unwittingly the supernaturalism with which the dead hero was coming to be so widely regarded." He was Ward Hill Lamon of Danville, Illinois. Of his reports, Mr. Lewis writes:

One time, said Lamon, Mrs. Lincoln attempted to joke her husband out of a dark mood, and had been answered, in slow and measured tones: "It seems strange how much there is in the Bible about dreams. There are, I think, some sixteen chapters in the Old Testament, and four or five in the New, in which dreams are mentioned, and there are many other passages scattered throughout the Book which refer to visions. If we believe the Bible, we must accept the fact that in the old days God and His angels came to men in their sleep, and made themselves known through dreams. Nowadays dreams are regarded as very foolish and are seldom told, except by old women and by young men and maidens in love."

And when Mrs. Lincoln asked him if he believed in dreams, he answered in that slow evasiveness with which he always refused to cross any Fox River until he had come to it:

"I can't say that I do, but I had one the other night which has haunted me ever since. After it occurred, the first time I opened the Bible. Strange as it may appear, it was at the twenty-eighth chapter of Genesis, which relates that wonderful dream Jacob had. I turned to other passages and seemed to encounter a dream or a vision wherever I looked. I kept on turning the leaves of the old Book, and everywhere my eye fell upon passages recording matters strangely in keeping with my own thoughts—supernatural visitations, dreams, visions, etc."

"You frighten me," cried Mrs. Lincoln, usually on nerve's edge. "What is the matter?"

Gradually she drove him into telling of his dream.

"About ten days ago," he began, very slowly, very sadly, "I retired late. I soon began to dream. There seemed to be a death-like stillness about me. Then I heard subdued sobs, as if a number of people were weeping. I thought I left my bed and wandered down-stairs. 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. Before me was a catafalque, on which rested a corpse, wrapt 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 altho it was only a dream, I have been strangely annoyed by it ever since."

Mr. Lewis devotes considerable space to John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln's assassin, who has become as much of a legendary figure as his victim. A certain amount of mystery attached to Booth's death and the disposal of his body, we are reminded by this volume, and this gave rise to the tale that not the murderer, but another, was killed, while the former escaped. During the years that followed Lincoln's death, men appeared in many places who were believed to be Booth. Some even made this claim personally. Mr. Lewis tells us of some of these strange cases:

In the '80's, devout ladies of Richmond, Virginia, sitting in their pews at Monumental Church, would thrill strangely as they looked up at their minister, the Rev. J. C. Armstrong, standing in the pulpit. Pastor Armstrong's eye was black, his raven hair was long, his sermons were dramatic, and he dragged one leg as he walked. Many a Virginia lady's thoughts, as she listened, would not be touching God, or the devil either. Instead she would be saying to herself, "I wonder if he really is J. Wilkes Booth."

In Atlanta, where the Rev. Mr. Armstrong later preached, and in other Southern cities, the whispers followed him around. After a bit there was a story that Edwin Booth, seeing the dominie watching him from a theater-box one night in Atlanta, was so startled by the man's resemblance to his brother that he arranged a private interview after the show. Rumor had it that Armstrong wore his hair long in the back to hide a tell-tale scar. All claims evaporated when his history was examined after his death, in 1891, but there are still simple folk in the South who hold to them in fond romance.

Some time in the late '70's, a drunken saloon-keeper of Granbury, Texas, confessed to a gaping boy from Memphis that he was the genuine J. Wilkes Booth, and related a detailed story of how Vice-President Johnson had put him up to the assassination of Lincoln, furnishing him with the password "T. B. Road," so that he might escape through the Union picket lines, and promising him a pardon if he ever should be caught. The saloon-keeper, known to Granbury as John St. Helen, a ruffian of

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sportive instincts, made much of a scar on the back of his neck, and convinced the greenhorn traveler that his tale was true, altho the townspeople of Granbury remembered that he had acquired the scar by a knife in a brawl at his groggery.

The youth, Finis L. Bates by name, grew up to be a lawyer in Memphis and dallied with the tale. In 1903, while touring the Southwest on business, he read that a man claiming to be Booth had committed suicide in Enid, Oklahoma. Arriving at the frontier town, he found it in a state of delighted fervor over the romance, and exhibiting the suicide's body with pride. Through its newspaper it was crying to the world that here was the escaped hero-villain, altho its people had known the fellow as David E. George, a drunken morphine fiend. Twice at least in his life George had declared that he was not the innocent house-painter that he seemed to be, but the real and genuine J. Wilkes Booth. Both confessions had been made while he was bed-fast from drugs, a fact that did not hamper the credulity of Finis L. Bates in the least. The lawyer, looking

upon George's remains, jumped to the conclusion that here was his great informant of a quarter of a century before, John St. Helen. The two men, he declared, were one, and that one—Booth. Whereupon Bates brought the suicide's body back to Memphis, where it rests to-day.

Finally, there are hosts of minor legends, such as that of the funeral train, a few of which Mr. Lewis recites thus:

In Illinois it used to be said that the brown thrush was not heard at its singing for a whole year after Lincoln had been laid in his tomb. Politicians have told audiences that the legislators, meeting at the Capitol in Springfield, felt the strange mystic spirit of Lincoln brooding over them, leading them to better and ever better services for his people.

At Elmhurst, Illinois, the ancient Irish flagman of the Chicago, Aurora and Elgin Railroad gave to Carl Sandburg one morning a new and solemn version of just what it was that J. Wilkes Booth shouted after murdering Abraham Lincoln. History has understood this cry of Booth's to have

been "*Sic semper tyrannis*," but the flagman had heard it differently.

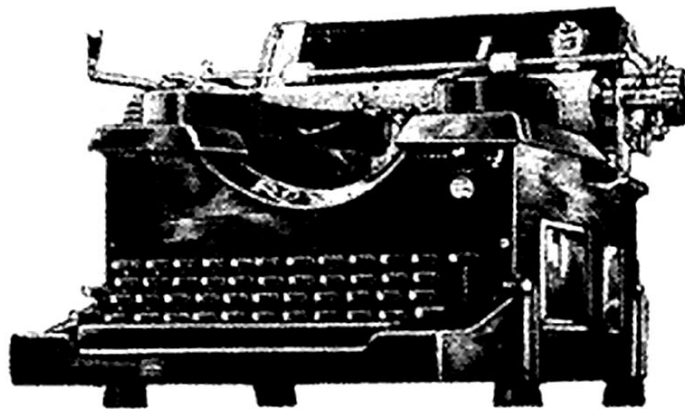
"This man Booth, he shot the Prisdint, jumped down onto the stage, and halloed, 'I'm sick, sind fer McGinnis!'"

On another morning, Sandburg asked the flagman how he would tell, in a few words, why Lincoln was loved so finely by so many people.

"He was humanity," said the flagman.

In all parts of the Republic are to be seen the large wooden or metal watch-faces with which jewelers and watch salesmen advertise their places of business. Frequently people say to each other, "Do you see where those watch hands are set? At eight-seventeen! That's the hour and minute Lincoln died!"

And the fact that Lincoln was shot shortly after ten o'clock and died at seven-twenty the next morning has not harmed the myth in any way. Neither has the legend been injured by the watch-makers' explanation that the clock hands are set at 8:17 because this position allows them the maximum space for advertising the firm names and slogans.



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