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Whitman and Lincoln: Clairvoyant Companions . . .

An Investigative Paper

by R. M. Hofmann

This is the story of a very curious friendship. It is, as well, a bewildering exploration into the deep personalities of two extraordinary men: Whitman and Lincoln. It concerns a comradeship made heroic by its lofty expression, and made perplexing by the fact that the companions never met or exchanged a spoken word!

The durable bond of affection between Whitman and Lincoln was undoubtedly forged in the late 1850's with the first publication of Leaves of Grass. This volume was generally ill-received in America, and its creator was sternly criticized for his plain-spoken celebration of life's sensual side, as well as his sharp departure from traditional literary technique. But Mr. Lincoln, engulfed by a sea of dissention, was nevertheless proud to place himself among the first few enthusiastic defenders of Whitman's style and spirit. One evening he took the book home with him, and when he returned to his Springfield law office the next morning he remarked that he "had barely saved it from being purified by fire by the women." He then requested that the book be left on a table in his office, and we are told that he often picked it up and read aloud from it. ¹

But this devotion had far deeper roots which penetrated the rich soil of sentiment from which both men had grown. Whitman was the poet of the democratic ideal to which Lincoln was so obviously dedicated. Consider, for example, these lines of Whitman:

My comrade!

For you to share with me two greatnesses, and a third one rising inclusive and more resplendent,

The greatness of Love and Democracy, and the greatness of Religion. ²

This is but a different method of saying, "With malice toward

none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right . . .” It would be unreasonable to suppose that the thoughts and actions of both men were not mutually enriching and inspiring.

One is tempted, therefore, to presume that they intentionally avoided a personal meeting, for many opportunities to be introduced presented themselves. During the Civil War, Whitman spent more than two years in Washington, serving in every way possible at the Military Hospital. “I see the President almost every day,” reads his diary of August 12, 1863, “as I happen to live where he passes to or from his lodgings out of town. We have got so we exchange bows, and very cordial ones . . .” And with an entry made on March 4, 1865, Whitman says of the President, “I never see that man without feeling that he is one to become personally attach’d to . . .” Here then, is the merest hint of a psychic affinity which may have bound the two men together, an assumption which draws considerable substantiation from incidents that occurred shortly before Lincoln’s death.

On April 10, 1865, Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln were entertaining guests at the White House. During the course of their conversation, Mr. Lincoln mentioned that he had recently had a very peculiar dream. He then attempted to dismiss the subject, but Mrs. Lincoln, quite dismayed, insisted that he relate the events of the dream. Mr. Lincoln reluctantly agreed to tell about it.

“About ten days ago, I retired very late. I had been waiting up for important dispatches. I could not have been long in bed when I fell into a slumber, for I was weary. 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 downstairs.

“Then 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 in the East Room, which I entered. There I met with a sickening surprise. Before me was a catafalque, on which rested a corpse in funeral vestments. Around it were 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.'"

Historians commonly agree that President Lincoln was wrong about the time of his dream. Ward Hill Lamon, one of the guests at the White House that evening, remembered this dialogue almost word for word. He believed that dream occurred on March 19. If Lamon is correct, then Lincoln's actual assassination took place approximately one month after the dream-assassination, April 15.

And as Lincoln's casket lumbered over the roads between Washington and Springfield, Whitman penned a final tribute to his beloved friend. This, his "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," is perhaps his most beautiful composition. In it, he reveals not only his admiration for Lincoln, but also discloses a recent weird premonition:

O western orb sailing the heaven,
Now I know what you must have meant as a month since I walk'd,
As I walk'd in silence the transparent shadowy night,
As I saw you had something to tell as you bent to me night after night,
As you droop'd from the sky low down as if to my side, (while the other stars all look'd on,) As we wandered together the solemn night, (for something I know not what kept me from sleep,) As the night advanced, and I saw on the rim of the west how full you were of woe,
As I stood on the rising ground in the breeze in the cool transparent night,
As I watch'd where you pass'd and was lost in the netherward black of the night,
As my soul in its trouble dissatisfied sank, as where you sad orb, Concluded, dropt in the night, and was gone.

We are now faced with something more than an astounding coincidence! Whitman speaks of a foreboding which tormented him

“a month since.” If this is accurate, the misfortune was forecasted to Whitman during the same week in which Lincoln’s ominous dream befell him . . . perhaps the same night!

And so we are left with a mystical enigma, and we must—forever—wonder why these two great men never met. Ahhh, but more tantalizing still: How much less a man would either have been without the other?

Po’ Nigger’s Song . . .

Now if Ah had a penny wid God’s pitchur on it
Ah’d buy me a secun-han soul
Fum dat fire-breathin Parson, (Ah’m poztive he sells em.)
An den, when Ah really felt whole,
Ah’d leave off mah sinnin an pray hard for Heaven:
Repent all mah cattin an booze.
But till Ah git dat God-cent, Ah’m woman-born nigger
An ain’t got a damn thing to lose!

... Pete Cooper