

With Malice Toward None . . .

(*Except Lincoln's Wife*)

By RUTH PAINTER RANDALL,
author of *"Mary Lincoln: Biography
of a Marriage."*

IF a Gallup poll were to be taken today on Mary Lincoln a majority of Americans would be likely to describe her as a cold, selfish, calculating shrew. This would be the result in large part of the portrait (or caricature) of Mrs. Lincoln presented by Lincoln's law partner, William H. Herndon, in his biography of Lincoln published twenty-four years after the President's death. For Herndon disliked Mrs. Lincoln intensely, and this hatred was a tremendous factor affecting his portrayal of Mrs. Lincoln.

Working with it was Herndon's sincere conviction that he was clairvoyant, that he could read people's minds, and that he knew truth by his own power of intuition. With his "mud instinct" and "dog sagacity" he could see, as he said, "to the gizzard" of a question. He employed a curious pseudo-psychoanalysis to reach his conclusions, elaborately reasoning out what should be true by "the lines of human conduct." A man holding such convenient theories is likely to end by believing what he wants to believe and, hating Mrs. Lincoln, Herndon wanted to believe the worst about her.

For many years Herndon's peculiarities were not fully understood. Meanwhile his distorted account of Mrs. Lincoln had become thoroughly embedded in Lincoln literature and had powerfully influenced an innocent public's estimate of an unfortunate woman who was bright-minded, warm-hearted, and affectionate, but who was also nervous, emotionally unstable, and to some degree abnormal—especially in later years. Unfortunately, Herndon's mental gymnastics continue to becloud her reputation, for writers and the public persist with the work he so ignobly advanced; they approach Mrs. Lincoln with a hostile viewpoint and unconsciously twist and torture statements in order to give her the worst possible interpretation.

From the vast array of Lincoln books two small examples will serve to show how this tendency operates. That Lincoln did not know happiness with the woman he married, that he



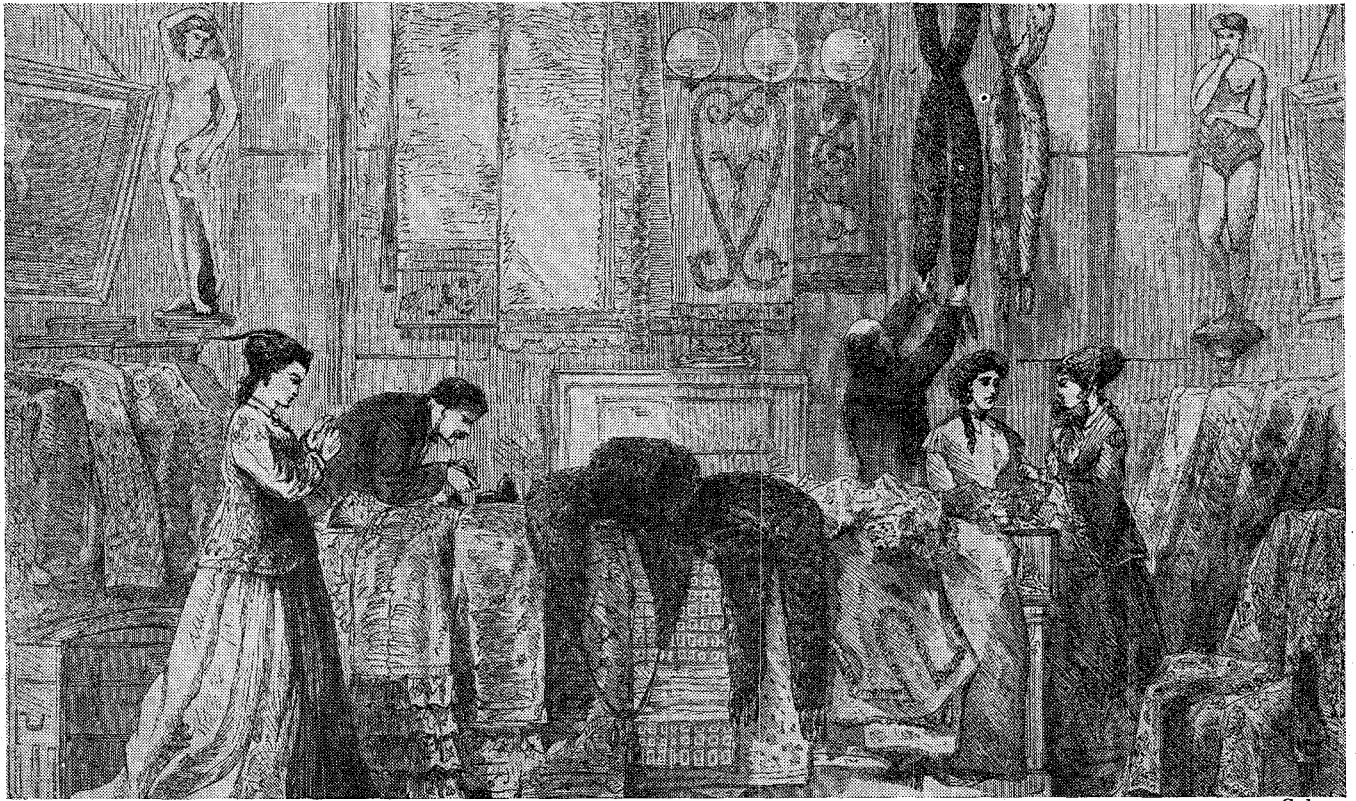
—Culver.

Mrs. Abraham Lincoln in the White House—"Love is eternal."

did not love her, and that she did not love him were unfounded theories generated in Herndon's mind. Lincoln never said he was domestically unhappy. But in the following incident we see how certain words of his were by main force twisted into an expression of unhappiness.

About two and a half months after he married Mary Todd he wrote his friend Joshua Speed: "How the marriage life goes with us I will tell you when I see you here, which I hope will be very soon." The big question with the Lincolns at that time was the prospect of Mary having a baby. It was a bit early to announce it, especi-

ally as such matters were treated in the Victorian era, but by the time Joshua came to Springfield things would be further along and the news could be told to this intimate friend. This is a reasonable guess at Lincoln's meaning. Yet his words have been interpreted as suggesting some disappointment in his marriage. Then, this unwarranted conjecture having been made, it is treated as a fact and is followed by the assertion that never afterwards did Lincoln express a word of unhappiness in his new relationship. (Not to leave the "big question" up in the air, one should perhaps state that Robert Todd Lincoln was born



—Culver.

Mrs. Lincoln's wardrobe on exhibition in New York—"a result of her buying mania was a woeful burden of debts."

nine months less three days after the Lincolns were married.)

Another sentence from a letter of Lincoln to Speed has received a Herndonian twist. More than eight months before he married Mary Todd Lincoln wrote to Speed: "My old father used to have a saying that 'if you make a bad bargain *hug* it the tighter.'" He was, of course, not applying it to his own marriage, then in the future.

WHEN months later Lincoln was meeting Mary secretly and they were planning to marry against the opposition of her family he bought a wedding ring in which he caused to be engraved the words: "Love is eternal." Coming from one who took such pains to express his true feeling the inscription is full of meaning as to Lincoln's approach to his marriage. Yet we find in Lincoln literature that wedding-ring inscription with its deep and genuine sentiment linked with the saying about the bad bargain, thus creating the impression that Lincoln regretted the marriage he had made. Both of these interpretations were written before Herndon's frailties as a witness had been fully explored; the voices were those of the writers but the hand was the hand of Herndon.

One gets very close to that suggested Gallup poll of public opinion about Lincoln's wife by noting the reaction to certain letters of hers recently brought to attention. In May

1952 various newspapers printed a letter which Mrs. Lincoln wrote to Judge David Davis, administrator of the Lincoln estate, on March 4, 1867. The letter was not new; a careful copy made from the original by Harry E. Pratt, now State Historian of Illinois, had been available to scholars in the Illinois State Historical Library for some years. The present writer had quoted from it in an article in the *New York Times Magazine* in February 1950. In this letter Mrs. Lincoln expressed her resentment of and disbelief in the lecture on Ann Rutledge which Herndon had given in Springfield about four months before, the lecture which was the launching of the Lincoln-Rutledge legend.

What widow looking back in her grief to twenty-odd years of a devoted marriage would not have resented a public statement that her husband had never loved her? Mrs. Lincoln knew this was untrue. Herndon had even said in his lecture, out of his soaring imagination, that Lincoln "never ended his letters with 'yours affectionately,'" yet we have today Lincoln's tender letters to his wife that are signed "Affectionately" or "Most affectionately." Mary Lincoln in her widowhood treasured, as she wrote, "a large package of his, dear, loving letters to me," poring over them and rereading them as best she could for her tears. She had proof that Herndon was telling an untruth.

What wonder is it that her letter to Judge Davis used emphatic language? "This is the return for all my husband's kindness to this miserable man! Out of pity he took him into his office, when he was almost a hopeless inebriate and although he was only a drudge in the place—he is very forgetful of his position and assumes a confidential capacity towards Mr. Lincoln."

In the newspaper articles and editorials that accompanied the printing of this letter the comments on Mrs. Lincoln show the usual automatic hostility. There is implied resentment of her remarks about Herndon. Yet for all her strong feeling this is a remarkable letter with statements whose correctness may well be examined. That Herndon drank and at times made a public spectacle of himself is indisputable. There is even a small sidelight as to his outpourings in his own statement that when he "wished to say something smart" he took "a Toddy as *Exciter*."

It is true that Lincoln, a well-established lawyer, did a great kindness in taking into his office this young man who was just receiving his license to practise law and in dividing the fees equally with him. As to Herndon's being a "drudge," he was the junior partner who by his own statement "toated books' & 'hunted up authorities.'" Lincoln was "the great big man of our firm [wrote

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Some Constitutional Counsel

"But We Were Born Free," by Elmer Davis (Bobbs-Merrill. 229 pp. \$2.75), is a collection of essays, mostly on man and intellectual freedom, by the distinguished news broadcaster.

By Gilbert Seldes

THERE is a thrilling moment in the adolescence of everyone who is destined to become an intellectual—the moment when self-consciously or subconsciously, and often fatuously, he understands that he is dealing with *general* ideas. He is no longer saying two plus two is four, he is dealing with x and y and z; and fifty years later the thrill of general ideas is still an excitement.

The moment I remember (and I don't dare to look up the date of publication) was when I read an essay by the Italian historian Ferrero, on that period in Roman history which is so full of scandal that most reports of it, including Gibbon's, are cloaked in the obscurity of a learned tongue. Ferrero noted the number of people who were protesting against the morals of the time and then proceeded to his generalization: a time isn't all corrupt when people are condemning it—the very presence and persistence of the critics proves that; the dreadful times are those in which corruption is so diffused that no one even protests.

I live in the same cold and comfortless world as Elmer Davis, but I console myself with the knowledge that it cannot be as bad as I fear, because Davis can still do battle—he is outnumbered, but he isn't silenced. The



particular world we inhabit is one in which the right of man to use his intelligence freely is jeopardized, in which year after year millions of people who destroyed one tyranny and are fighting another feel themselves less and less free to express their thoughts, in which the secrecy of the voting booth is their last refuge, in which the guarantees of the Bill of Rights are so precarious that men who have sworn to defend the Constitution are proposing laws to nullify them in the name of national security—as if the only security we ever had was grounded in anything but freedom.

It happens that Mr. Davis's treatment of the undermining of the amendment that deals with self-incrimination is one of the sketchier portions of his brilliant survey of the "perilous night" (to use his chapter heading) in which we live. I find it sketchy because it doesn't entirely resolve my own misgivings, but I find it encouraging because it reinforces a principle that runs all through his book, the principle that you do not abandon principle for immediate success—coupled with contempt for those who do this and pretend at the same time to be the only preservers of principle.

As I began this review with a reminiscence, I shall add another, even more relevant to our time and, by its nature, "exclusive." In Santayana's last half-year at Harvard I took Philosophy 10, his course in esthetics. One of the books assigned for report was Tolstoy's "What Is Art?" I wrote a long essay on it and would now be happy to forget it, except that I do not want to forget the remarks, in Santayana's crabbed clear hand, on my summation. I wrote (Heaven forgive me, but I thought it was smart to be reactionary then): "It is a pity that the custom of burning books has disappeared, because this one would be my first choice to go on the pyre . . ." And Santayana replied: "It is interesting to discover that there are young men in America who are enthusiasts for Paganism and who would restore the Inquisition in order to destroy the Gospel." (No mean stylist himself, Mr. Davis will appreciate the turn of phrase.)

We are in an age bent on restoring the Inquisition in order to destroy the gospel of American freedom, and El-



THE AUTHOR: Probably no one, no one at all, among radio news commentators has won as many accolades as Elmer Davis, who has been broadcasting lean, incisive, unintimidated copy ever since he was asked to fill in as a pinch-hitter one day back in 1939. Just the other evening he received his latest, the Lauterbach Award for 1953, for "a substantial contribution in the field of civil liberties." His long career hasn't been exclusively microphonic, however. Davis spent ten years on the *Times*, until 1924, when he left to free lance; has written novels; has contributed to magazines, the *SR* included (he first wrote for the *SR* in 1924, the year it was founded, and was on its editorial board in the early Forties); and was chief of the OWI during World War II. His novel-writing (it began in the Twenties) ran for over a decade, with stories serialized in *Collier's* and elsewhere. When he wasn't dreaming up plots he'd read and reread the Latin poets, Horace and Catullus in particular. Like any self-respecting scholar, he reads them in the original. This grounding in the classics shows up in much of his work: he is fond of finding examples in the past to heighten a point he is making about the present.

In Washington the other day Davis, who has never been afraid to call a rabble-rouser a rabble-rouser, had a couple of things to say on a couple of subjects. About his own work: "I am still reporting and commenting on what happens in Washington; but on Sundays only, not every night. This due to an attack of high blood pressure last summer, and not to the success of any of the numerous endeavors to get me off the air." And about the state of the union: "It obviously contains more people than I believed three years ago who are indifferent to facts, and willing to believe anything: if it is only scandalous enough. I am not yet persuaded, however, that these people are a majority. If they should turn out to be, this country will become something such as we have never known, and it will not be much fun to live in it."

—BERNARD KALB.