

FATHER ABE

Here they come!”

Eighteen little colored children, tiny tufts of life, peeked their faces out the doorway of a ruined arms factory and made their way into the sunshine of a glorious Richmond, Va., afternoon. As they emerged in line, holding hands, forty-three Negro soldiers, members of the 32nd Pennsylvania Colored Infantry Regiment, dressed in tattered Union Blue, stopped and leaned on their shovels to watch. They'd spent this morning as they did yesterday morning, and the one before that and the one before that, digging a trench around the ruins of the Tredegar Gun and Ammunition Factory, which they had helped destroy the month before, along with most of Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy. Several weeks had passed since they'd taken this town. The war was nearly over but not quite. No one was quite sure. Nobody told them anything. There were still things to do, but where to do them, and how to do them, and when to do them, they had no idea. Their orders were to dig, and when they stopped, to dig, and dig again.

And dig they did. For nine days the soldiers dug, with only one distraction. Each day around noon, the men, thirsty and hot, exhausted from digging, would stop to lean on their shovels and admire the day's one form of entertainment, a daily ritual: Each day eighteen orphaned Negro children, aged five to thirteen years, emerged in the gorgeous Virginia afternoon sun from the ruins of the factory and paraded past, marching out in double file to follow their caretaker, Sister Coles, on a daily trek to the Freedman's Bureau about four miles up the road, for a meal of hard tack and biscuits.

The soldiers enjoyed watching the kids. Each day they gathered in small groups to swab their faces with handkerchiefs and guess the origins of each Negro child as the orphans marched by.

“That big one there, he's a Georgia Negro,” a brigade cannoneer remarked. “See that wide head? That's how they look.”

“Naw,” another soldier offered, “that's a Sea Island boy. See them wide feet? Them's fishermen's feet, I'd reckon. South Carolina. Low Country.”

“He ain't Low Country,” the cannoneer snorted. “He's from Maryland. That boy's daddy is a waterman. That's where his feet come from. Watermen

got the biggest feet.”

A portly rifleman stepped between the two and said gaily, “I wouldn’t bet a smooth dollar on none of y’all guesses,” he said. “But that one there,” he pointed. “I know who his daddy is.” He called out. “Hey Abe Lincoln! Hey boy!”

At the end of the line the last child, a tiny, mixed-race boy, looked up. Abraham Henry Lincoln, aged five, his soft skin the color of creamed coffee, the sun bouncing off his curly hair and light eyes, gaped in awe at the muscled, tall, smiling men leaning on their shovels. He waved and smiled shyly, showing several missing front teeth, prompting a burst of laughter and woofing.

“Boy, when you gonna grow some teeth!”

“Son, them gums is ripe enough for butter beans!”

“Keep your mouth closed, boy, less’n flies get in there!”

“Hey Abe,” the cannoneer called out. “Want an apple?”

Little Abe Lincoln stopped short, dropping the hand of the kid in front of him, lingering, as the rest of the kids marched ahead in twos. He stood shyly for a moment, then slowly crossed the road as the line of kids drew away.

“Where you from, boy?” the cannoneer asked. “We got a bet going.”

“Where’s my apple?” he asked.

“Lemme see now,” the cannoneer said, searching his pockets. “I just had it . . .”

Little Abe Lincoln watched anxiously as the cannoneer, bereft of apples and any other food, searched his pockets.

“Aw, leave ’em be, Pete,” the sergeant said. His name was Big Nate, a tall, serious man from Alabama. He patted Little Abe Lincoln on the head.

“G’wan, boy. Catch up to the rest, before Sister Coles comes back and puts a cat’s tail on ya. I’ll might fetch you a real apple tomorrow.”

“Where you gonna get it from?” the cannoneer sneered.

Nate ignored him and nodded at Abe. “G’wan ahead, boy.”

Little Abe turned to hustle to catch up with the line of children, which had nearly reached the corner of the battle-torn street of ravaged homes and storefronts. The child had nearly caught up to the others when suddenly the cannoneer shouted out, “By the way, your daddy’s coming tomorrow!”

Abe stopped short as the line of children moved away, turned the corner, and disappeared out of sight. He trotted back.

“You know my daddy?” Little Abe said. He stared up at the cannoneer, a portly soldier named Vernon, who seemed as tall as a tree and as wide as a house.

“Course I do! It’s Father Abe hisself,” he said, with a wink at the others.

Little Abe Lincoln stood alone now. The line of kids had vanished.

“How you know he’s my pa?” he asked.

“He got the same name, don’t he?” the cannoneer said. “*He’s Abe Lincoln. You Abe Lincoln.* Put two and two together, boy. He’s a big man, y’know, your pa.”

“You know him?”

“Why, everybody knows Abe Lincoln, son! He’s the biggest white man in the world. He lives in the biggest white house you ever seen. Got land yonder far as your eyes can see. Got more money than the King of France. And he’s coming tomorrow! Right here to Richmond!”

“He is?”

“Surely! Heard that from a mule skinn—”

“That’s enough, Vernon,” the sergeant, Big Nate, said.

The cannoneer glanced at his fellow soldiers, whose smiles had disappeared.

“I’m just funning him, Nate,” he said.

Nate turned toward Little Abe and knelt down. Abe saw the big man’s gentle eyes focus on him.

“Now, son—” and suddenly Little Abe felt himself being snatched in the air and the world was upside down. He found himself seeing the sergeant sideways. Sister Coles had grasped him and snatched him in the air. Her strong arm held him on her hip like a sack of meal. She glared at Big Nate.

“How’d you like that soup I made for y’all last week, Mr. Nate?” she asked.

“I liked it fine, Sister Coles,” Big Nate said.

“Good. Because I peed in it.”

The soldiers laughed as Sister Coles turned away, holding Abe Lincoln under her hip like a pig suckling, moving down the road fast, as if her speed would ease the great pain that she knew had ached Little Abe all five years of his life, from the moment he could recognize himself. That he was named after a man he never saw, a father that never was nor ever would be. And that at age five, he still had no idea who Abraham Lincoln was.

. . .

THAT NIGHT, A LONE OWL stood guard atop the peak of the shelled-out roof of the destroyed north wing of the abandoned Tregador Gun Factory. Beneath a twilight sky and shattered rooftop, Sister Coles’s orphans lay on makeshift straw mattresses serving as beds, underneath tables that once held lathes, tools, and machine presses and now served as roofs during the rain, inside a factory workshop that had once powered a mighty nation to war against itself.

Their hissing, chattering voices lifted into the night air, through the gaping roof and up into the night as they discussed matters of life, their whispers carried aloft by the wind into the sky, where every dream seemed possible and the echoes of past pain and lost parents vanished into the promise of tomorrow's coming.

"When my daddy comes to get me," said one eight-year-old, "he's gonna make me a feather bed."

"My mamma promised me she's gonna bring me a pocket full of sugar candy when she comes back," bragged a seven-year-old girl.

"Oh hush!" snorted Solomon, the oldest among them, a wise old man of thirteen. "Ain't nobody comin for y'all. When Mamma Coles gets tired of you, you gonna have to shift for yourself. Y'all ain't got no mas or pas. You got no place to go. Git that through your heads."

There was a raw silence. Then a rustling. From the end of the room, a tiny voice piped up. "I got a pa," Little Abe Lincoln said proudly.

"No you don't," Solomon said.

"Yes I do. I got a pa, and he's a great, big white man. He lives in a great, big white house. He's got more land over yonder than you've ever seen."

Solomon cackled. "Abe Lincoln ain't your pa, stupid. You ain't even got a name. Abe's the name somebody throwed at you when they found you on the road someplace. Your real name's No-Pa."

A burst of laughter covered the room, echoing off the walls and into the sky above.

Little Abe Lincoln felt his face flushing hot. "That's a lie, Solomon. I got a pa, and he's coming to get me tomorrow!"

"Who said?"

"Soldier said it."

More howling and guffaws.

"Abe Lincoln ain't your pa, cheese face," Solomon said through his laughter.

"Yes he is!"

"No he ain't!"

"Yes he is! And when he comes tomorrow, he's gonna bust your face and —!"

A sudden opening of the door silenced the room. The kids flopped on their backs onto their straw beds. Sister Coles, holding a lantern, walked into the silence, her bare feet slapping against the wooden floor. She swept a lantern light up and down the aisle of mattresses and makeshift beds.

"Next one I hear talking in here'll get it from my switch something scandalous," she said.

She stood in the middle of the floor, staring around as a cone of silence enveloped the room. She then counted eighteen heads as she did every night. All eighteen in place. Then she turned on her heel and left, closing the door behind her.

The next morning, at dawn, when she came to wake the children to milk the single cow in the yard, she counted seventeen heads. There was one missing. Little Abe Lincoln was gone.

. . .

TWO CANNON BATTERY SNOUTS peered into the night sky like devil's eyes. Behind the pitched tents and dead fires, the 9th Louisiana Colored Infantry Regiment slept. Somewhere in the camp's darkness, a harmonica sounded wearily. It was 4 a.m. at the corner of Walker and Greal Streets, and it might as well have been 4 a.m. all over the world, for the men of the 9th Louisiana Colored Infantry slept the sleep of dead men. They had arrived three hours previous, fresh from a terrible skirmish in nearby Petersburg, led by a bungling Union commander whose idiocy and cowardice had sawed off whatever edge of strength and goodwill they had left. The fight, against the desperate 14th Virginian Greys, white farmers and mule skinnners like themselves, men of grit and guts who were similarly exhausted, was a disorderly, wild, scandalous, useless mess, which deteriorated from cannons to rifles to bayonets to stones to fists—the whole bit of it just at war's end, too. They were exhausted. They wanted no more of it.

In the eerie darkness, a lone sentry named Settles, smoking a pipe near the edge of camp, noticed a possum slip into a ditch covered by old planking near the road, which some soldier had obviously used as shelter to cover himself as he slept. He trained his rifle on the ditch, thinking he had scored his own private dinner. Then, out of both greed and deference to his exhausted, sleeping colleagues, he yanked out his bayonet, placed it on the tip of his rifle, and rose to score his meal in silence.

He crossed the road, picked up a large stone, gently set it on one end of the ditch to plug it, then crept stealthily back to the other end. He stood over the ditch on the planking and raised the bayonet in the air, readying to stab the creature as it scampered out the only exit. Then he stomped down heavily onto the plank with his boot.

He heard the creature wriggling down the ditch, but it fooled him, for it was bigger than he thought and wiggled so hard it rumbled the plank a bit. Settles, startled, stepped off the plank just as the rodent scampered out the end of the ditch and rose on two feet like a man, facing him like a ghost, causing him to backpedal, trip on a stone, lose his balance, and fall on his rear end

with a shout, dropping his loaded musket to the ground, which discharged on its own with a resounding bang, blasting a precious musket ball into the woods behind him.

The camp leapt to life. Fires were doused. Grunts were heard. The clattering of pots and pans. Men rushed from every direction, half dressed, rifles in hand, some dressed in rebel gear they'd recently procured. They found the sentry Settles standing over Little Abe, the kid crouched into a ball, his hands held over his ears, his tiny face scrunched in agony, with the sentry standing over him.

A colored sergeant stepped forward. "What's going on, Settles?"

Settles, rattled, blew a whoosh of air out of puffed-up cheeks. "I damn near killed him, Sergeant. He come out this here ditch. Damn fool . . ."

The sergeant, a huge, friendly-faced Negro, rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, stooped down, and scooped up the child with big, muscled arms, picking up Little Abe like he was an infant. He sat on the large pipe with the kid in his lap as the other soldiers crowded in. "What you doin' here, boy?"

"I'm looking for my pa," he said.

"Who's your pa? He got a name?"

"Abe Lincoln."

The men burst out laughing. Several clapped Little Abe on the back.

"Father Abe? That's a good choice, boy."

"I'd give five whole dollars to see Father Abe, chile."

"Best man in the world, your pa! God bless him!"

The sergeant frowned. He took a lantern from a fellow soldier and held it to the boy's face. Now they could see him clearly. The white features. The curly hair. The brown skin. "Gosh," one soldier said. "He's a regular buckaroo."

More laughter. The sergeant grew serious. "Be quiet," he said. He sighed and looked around. "Anybody know this child?"

"He might be from that gun factory over yonder on Taylor Road," said one soldier. "Heard a colored woman started an orphanage over there. The Pennsylvania Thirty-Second's digging ditches 'round it."

"Well, we gonna stay clear of that," the sergeant said. "We ain't digging no ditches." He nodded at the sentry. "Settles, get a mule and a wagon and take this boy back to the gun fact—"

"Naw!" Little Abe grasped the sergeant's chest and arms. "I want my pa."

"Son, he ain't here."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"He's coming tomorrow!"

“Well, you’ll see him tomorrow then.”

“Ain’t no Abes here?” the boy asked.

“We got three or four Abes here,” the sergeant said. “In fact that’s my name, Abe. But I’m Abe Porter. Not Abe Lincoln.”

“You my pa?”

“Course not,” the sergeant said hotly.

This prompted a round of laughter and wry comments from the men standing behind the sergeant.

“I knowed you was a hot one, Sarge.”

“Hey Sarge, you got a ready-made family . . .”

“Sarge got a busy noodle, don’t he? And I thought he was a preacher!”

“Hush that!” the sergeant barked. He looked around, serious. “Hush up. Nothing funny in it. Nothing funny at all. Boy’s got nobody in the world.”

The men fell silent.

“Who gived you that name, boy?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Little Abe said.

More soft chuckles, interrupted by an abrupt rustling sound heard in the bushes. A lantern was seen moving toward them in the trees. The lantern emerged from the foliage, illuminating a white face. The men straightened, turned, and saluted as a white captain stepped toward them. The sergeant stood up, holding the child.

“What’s wrong, Sergeant?” the captain asked.

“Nothing, sir,” the sergeant said. “Settles found this child here wandering ’round.”

The captain shone his light on the boy’s face. More men had gathered by now, and for the first time they all could see Little Abe Henry Lincoln clearly. Their eyes widened in surprise at the coffee-colored face and the curly hair.

“Get him back where he belongs,” the captain said. “We just got word that the president is coming here. In four hours! President Abraham Lincoln himself!” He was clearly excited, breathing deeply but trying to maintain the dignity of his rank.

The men gaped at each other in silent surprise as the captain peered at them, then down at the brown bundle in the sergeant’s arms. He turned to Settles.

“Settles, roust up the camp right now so we can clean this place up and move at dawn.” To the sergeant he said, “Sergeant Porter, take a detail over to Walker and Greal, straighten up our cannons and mule skinnings. Get ’em cleaned up. Hurry up.”

“What about the child?” the sergeant said, holding Little Abe.

“Settles can take the contraband back when he’s done rousting the camp,” the captain said.

The word “contraband” hung in the air a moment, like a barber’s razor blade that slowly turns in the air, drifting toward a trusting customer’s neck. The captain appeared not to notice.

“Git movin’,” he said. “We got three hours till daylight.” He disappeared into the brush and the darkness of the camp again.

The men stood around the sergeant, who still held the boy. Settles stepped forward and the sergeant spoke to Little Abe as he handed him over.

“Well, child, the captain says you got to go now.”

“I don’t wanna!”

“Well, you gotta.”

“No!”

“Don’t cling on me, little feller. I ain’t the Abe you want. I got no family and don’t want nar, not in slavery time, no sir. G’wan now. Stop clinging on me. Don’t make me git tough on you, fella. G’wan with Settles here. Settles, take this boy off me! . . . C’mon, child, easy now. Stop all that fussing. Settles, help me out here, would ya? Lissen, boy, Settles here’ll take good care of you. Leggo me, would ya, please? Quit that crying now, child . . .”

. . .

AFTER A FEW MINUTES, the child quieted down, but he would not be wrested from Sergeant Porter. Porter glumly sent Settles to fetch a mule and wagon for the trip back to the orphanage while he sat on the edge of the ditch with Little Abe in his lap. A few of the men drifted off, but several remained, kneeling in a semicircle around the boy held by the man seated in the ditch.

“I wanna go with you,” Little Abe said.

“You can’t go where I’m going.”

“Why not?”

“Well . . . where I’m going, they ain’t got no children.”

“Where’s that?”

“Lafayette Parish, Louisiana.”

“I’ll be the first child there!”

The sergeant stared at Little Abe. “You’ll live a life of sorrow and pity in my home country, son.”

“Then why you taking me there?”

“I ain’t said I was taking you no place!”

“How come you live there if they ain’t got no children? And if you bring some, why can they tell you, big as you is, not to? Ain’t you Abe Lincoln?”

“I’m Abe Porter!”

“Don’t you live in a great big white house? Ain’t you got more land over yonder than I’ve ever seen?”

“I ain’t got nar house. Nor land.”

“What you got?”

“Freedom, son.”

“What’s that?”

The sergeant looked around. A couple of men cursed and drifted back toward camp across the road. But several remained, watching silently, their tired faces grim.

“If you have to ask,” Porter said sheepishly, “I don’t know.”

“Does it mean,” little Abe piped up, “that nobody can tell you what to do?”

“Well . . . maybe.”

“And you can come and go as you please?”

“I suppose so,” the sergeant said miserably.

“That’s what I’d like for myself,” Little Abe announced, satisfied. “To come and go where I please. And nobody telling me what to do. Let’s go to Louisiana.”

“I can’t just up and go, boy.”

“Why not?”

“I got to pay my dues first. Freedom ain’t free, son. You got to fight for it.”

“When do the fight end?”

“It’s just about ending now, I reckon.”

“So freedom’s here?”

“Well . . . not quite yet.”

“When it comes, how you’ll know it?”

Sergeant Porter seemed confused. “Know what?”

“When freedom comes. How’ll you know?”

“How . . . ?” Porter stammered. He looked around at the men. Several more drifted away and now only a few were standing around. The cllop of a mule’s footsteps could be heard, then a mule and wagon, silhouetted against the campfires of the bivouacked camp, appeared on the nearby road. Settles dismounted from the wagon and walked over to the ditch.

“One mule and wagon ready, Sergeant,” he said.

Porter looked up and down the road. Then glanced in the direction of the thickets toward the camp, where the captain had disappeared to. The faintest glimmer of sunlight could be seen now. There were only six men squatting around Porter now, including Settles, all silhouettes in the dawn.

Porter stared down into the ditch. He seemed lost in thought. Finally he spoke, staring down at the ditch. “I done preached to y’all the best I know

how these past years. And we still among the living, ain't we, thanks to God's grace."

He sighed softly, then added, "But not all of us."

He looked up, shifting the child in his lap, his gaze moved to the camp behind them, his eyes shining, his features slowly becoming visible in the growing light.

"Something's been digging at me ever since they told us this war is winding down," he said. "I come to thinking. About Yancy Miles, and Irving Gooden, and Linwood Sims, God rest their souls. I come to wonder about their deliverance, and about what God wants. Not for them. For us, who has fought under other men's rulings and is not yet gone from labor to reward. Who among us is gonna remember them? Yancy, with his cussing self, and Linwood, who could sing so good, and Irving and his brother Zeke, and all the rest of the colored who's deadened in these fields. The white folks'll know theirs, won't they? They'll write songs for 'em, and raise flags for 'em, and put 'em up in books the way they know how. But ain't nobody but God gonna give more than a handful of feed to the ones of us who died out here fighting for our freedom. And what is that anyway? This child here knows more about it than I do."

He stood up, holding the boy. "Let God's truth roll according to circumstance. If I'm gonna swing, it won't be for nothing. I won't hold it against none of y'all should you turn me in to the captain. I reckon you'd be doing me a favor, for I'd rather hang from the gallows than torture myself for the rest of my life by selling lies and confusion to children, like I just done to this here child, fool that I am."

He said to Settles, "Hold him for a minute." To Little Abe, he said, "You wait here with Settles. I'll be back shortly." He handed the boy to Settles, turned, and marched toward the camp across the road.

Settles, Little Abe, and the other four men watched Sergeant Porter cross the road and disappear into the camp, now illuminated by campfires.

"He's taking me back to Louisiana?" Little Abe asked.

Settles found himself holding the boy so tight to his chest that the little fella was laboring to draw air. He loosened his grip so Little Abe could breathe. "If he do, he's walking there on his elbows."

"What's that mean?"

With one hand, Settles shifted the boy and pressed Little Abe's head to his shoulder so that the boy's face stuck out over his back and his mouth was close to the boy's ear. "Don't say one more blessed word, child. Nothing. If you do, I'll put you over my knee and warm them two little biscuits on your backside myself."

“What I done wrong?”

“What’d I say! Be quiet! Whatever you said to him, don’t say it to me, for God’s sake, less’n you’ll have me in as much trouble as him.”

. . .

THE NEXT MORNING, the 9th Louisiana Colored Infantry Regiment stood in proud formation, their cannons and mule skinnners assembled in a tight straight solid line for nearly a mile, their uniforms, though dirty, buttoned and ordered properly, the brass buttons and broadsword handles of their commanders glistening in the sun, as Abe Lincoln himself turned the corner of Walker and Greal. The president walked with a small entourage of men and officers, he being the tallest of them, moving in a stately manner, like a tower among small cottages, his face pockmarked by grief and struggle, holding the hand of his son Tad. He nodded at the troops as he moved slowly down the road, occasionally tipping his hat and smiling. In ten days he would be dead, slain by an assassin’s bullet, surrendered to history.

But for the 9th Louisiana Colored Infantry, it was the proudest, most electrifying moment of their lives, one they would, to a man, never forget. Thus, few among them noticed that among their 120 troops, 14 cannons, 11 wagons, and 45 mule skinnners who stood in tight formation to greet the Republic’s sixteenth president there was one missing Union Army mule, one missing Union Army wagon, several barrels of Union Army supplies, and one unpaid Union Army soldier named Sergeant Abe Porter, who at that moment was making tracks north with a boy named Little Abe, rolling that Army mule at a double trot as fast as it could go, man and boy bound for the North and the long wait for the arrival of freedom and all that it represented, whatever it was, whenever it was, and however it was bound to come.