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WITH

NOTES AND QUERIES

Americanus sum: Americani nihil a me alienum puto

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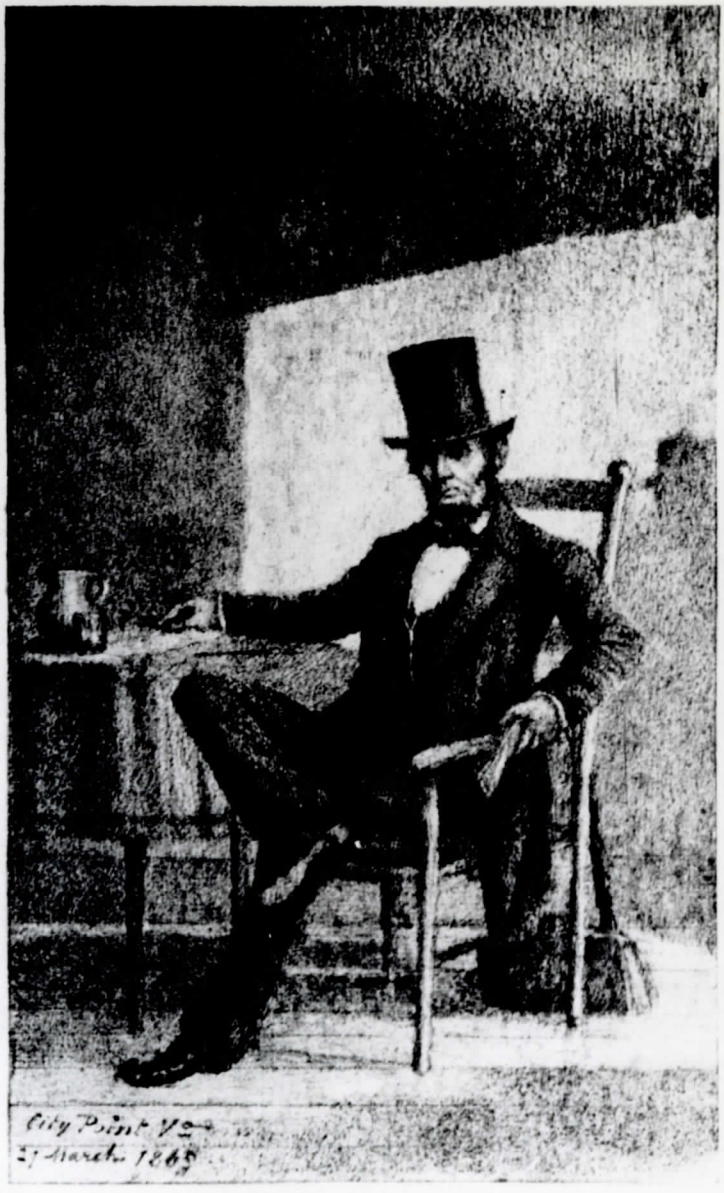

LINCOLN AT GRANT'S HEADQUARTERS

CITY POINT, VA.

From original pencil drawing by Pierre Morand, taken from a sketch made by Albert Hunt at City Point, March 27, 1865

NOT BEFORE PUBLISHED

(Probably the last portrait made, only two weeks before his death)

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CONSPIRACY AGAINST LINCOLN

IN January, 1865, I went to Washington to settle my Army accounts, and was offered the appointment as aide to General Hancock, but as unhealed wounds prevented, I took instead an appointment in the office of the Commissary General of Prisoners, then in the second story of a house corner of F and 20th Streets, west of the White House and War Department.

Of the several clerks employed it will be necessary to mention but one—Louis J. Weichman. As it was through him I became connected with the matters to be mentioned, and as he was the chief witness against the Lincoln conspirators, a slight description of him may be well. He was of Pennsylvania German stock, about twenty-eight years old, tall and broad-shouldered, well-educated, speaking several languages, and had been intended for the Catholic priesthood, though he never actually entered it, but had taught school in Washington. Physically and intellectually he was a giant, but in bravery I should call him a dwarf.

He boarded at 604 H street, with Mrs. Surratt, one of whose sons (Isaac) was in the rebel army, and the other, John, with his sister Annie, whom Weichman admired, lived at home. About the twentieth of February Weichman appeared very much upset and asked me to meet him privately in a small room called the supply room, where stationery, &c., was kept. His face wore a look of misery and fear, and perspiration ran down his cheeks. I thought he had gone crazy when he told he had been carrying a terrible secret, which so weighed on him that he must confide it to me, but only under a solemn pledge of secrecy.

Naturally I refused to do anything of the sort, and not until the next day did I agree to keep his confidence, provided I could safely do so. Then he came out with his story: "I have often told you that Mrs. Surratt's is a rendezvous for Southerners and rebel sympathizers, who come and go at all times, day and night. Information is gathered and

given out, and only well-known disloyal people are welcome there; in fact they suspect me, and only the old-time friendship between John and I makes it possible for me to stay. For some time I have been aware that something unusual is going on. There have been long secret meetings in John's room. Mrs. Surratt, John Wilkes Booth and some others are always there, and I am sure some of them are connected with the rebel government and are here under false names. I found arms—pistols and daggers—and a false mustache, in the room, and John quarrelled with me the other day for commenting on Booth's frequent visits, and made me swear not to reveal anything I knew or might hereafter learn. I can't stand it any longer, and I know you will stand by me now I have told you.

Continuing, he said, " John told me they were engaged in running cotton from the South into our lines, as a blind; that they had planned to kidnap Mr. Lincoln and his Cabinet, take them over the Potomac into rebel territory, and thus force the North to compromise with the South. If they could not effect an advantageous compromise, they would hold them for a large ransom; in either case there was big money in it. The time set was Inauguration Day, March 4, as then there would be so many strangers in the city that people's attention would be diverted, and this would give them a better chance to operate.

They had arranged with rebels across the Potomac to have men and horses ready there, to get the captives to Richmond as quickly as possible. John Surratt had shown him letters alleged to be from persons in the rebel government—but he would not show the signatures. He said all arrangements, every detail, had been made, and they only waited for March 4th; there was not the slightest chance of failure, and now the time was drawing near to act, if act they do.

He ended by saying, " Now, Major, you know my trouble, and I feel you can and will help me; but you must be discreet, don't speak to me on the street, as I am watched and by those who would swear my life away to help the South. So, I thought " this is Weichman's trouble; and I am sorry for him."

His story stunned and amazed me. I could not believe the plotters would be so foolhardy as to attempt the kidnapping of the President and

Cabinet, and yet I realized how bitter and desperate was the disloyal element in Washington, and Weichman was sure the plan was just as he had outlined it. We discussed it thoroughly, and I found he was in the dark about many of its details, or at least unable to answer many of my questions. The interview resulted in my agreeing to think the matter over, and try to think of some way to defeat the plot, and yet protect him. Looking back, I realize much more strongly than at the time—when I was but twenty-four years old—what a large contract I had undertaken.

I got away from the office and to my room as soon as I could. There I went over the plan in detail, and decided that the only thing to do was to interview Secretary Stanton. Though he was no favorite with the soldiers, who considered him overbearing and cold-blooded, all felt that he was a man of sound judgment as well as iron will; in other words one who could be depended on in a pinch—as I certainly was.

At the trial of the conspirators Weichman truly said "Major Gleason advised me to talk 'secesh' with those fellows, to enlist their sympathy, find out what they were about and, in case they went South, go to General C. C. Augur—then Provost Marshal in Washington—get horses for him (Gleason) and myself, so we could go South with them and find out just what they intended doing; but he (Weichman) had replied that that would never do, they were too sharp;" and that I then said the only thing to do was to see Mr. Stanton.

Nothing came of my three interviews with Weichman, except to strengthen my conviction of the seriousness of the situation, and the extreme fear he had of the suspected persons. He was in a complete "funk."

My room-mate was Lieutenant Joshua W. Sharp, an Assistant Provost Marshal on General Augur's staff; a quiet, level-headed fellow—and a level head was just what was needed at that time. I called on him and told him Weichman's story. He listened carefully, and we discussed the whole plan. He said it was nonsense—no one would be foolish enough to attempt the abduction, either of the President alone or of the Cabinet—that Weichman was being fooled, etc.

But I finally convinced him there might be something in it, and we

agreed to notify the authorities. This he was to do, as he could easily do it in the line of his duty. He was to shield Weichman all he could—as I told Weichman himself the next morning, completely unnerving him. He protested that if the action became known neither of us would be safe for an hour. I told him he had just that day to give the information himself, or I would do it the next. I then saw Sharp and arranged how to act if Weichman failed.

To escape from the horde of visitors who thought it their bounden duty to impose their presence on the President for no earthly reason but curiosity, Mr. Lincoln had been in the habit of spending his nights at the Soldiers' Home, three miles out of the city. Rooms were kept there for him, which he occupied when he could escape from urgent public business, and during the warm weather he spent most of his nights there, going late in the afternoon or early in the evening.

He had been many times urged by his friends to have a cavalry guard, sufficient to insure his safety, but he would not consent, and only an orderly or two went as escort.

This was his custom at the time this plot was conceived. It was known to every one in Washington and suggested the plot itself. Sharp arranged to get word to Secretary Stanton of as much of the story as was necessary to secure his assistance; for it was no easy matter to get an audience with the great Secretary of War. It was more difficult than to see the President himself, nor was it certain he would hear your story after you got there. He was—well, rather explosive in his language, a trifle imperious and overbearing in temper, and not a lovable man to meet socially. It was necessary to reach him through official or semi-official channels. This was done and he ordered two companies of cavalry to follow the President's carriage.

The first evening of their duty they had gone but a short distance when he noticed his following, stopped the carriage and sent word to the officer in command to report to him. Asking why he was there and who sent him, the reply was "Secretary Stanton." The President said Stanton was too officious; that "he has been trying to have a guard go with me for some time, and I have refused." Then, with one of his quizzical

smiles, he asked "Why, Captain, what do you suppose anyone wants of me? I am not at all afraid; however, if Mr. Stanton has sent you I suppose you must go, but it is giving you a lot of extra work for nothing. I will see Mr. Stanton in the morning."

During the night he evidently thought the matter over and concluded Mr. Stanton's "officiousness" was due to his intense anxiety—so the guard was continued during the President's life.

The next day, as I reached the office I met Weichman, looking happy. He said he had told U. S. Enrolling Officer McDavitt (an old acquaintance of his) who in turn had notified the authorities; but for some reason the conspirators had flown—the French woman who carried mail through the lines, to Canada; Surratt to Richmond, Booth to Frederick, Maryland, where he had engaged to play a short engagement; and that the authorities were on the alert, though not fully believing his story.

At a late date it came out that Weichman had been perfectly right—the attempt at kidnapping was to have been made on March 4th; that the relays of horses and men were to be placed, south of the Potomac—all as he had stated.

But at that time, especially when March 4th passed without anything happening, we began to think we had been badly fooled, or that the whole scheme had been abandoned. We began to be very busy in our office, and on Friday, April 14th, I went to Camp Parole, Maryland, with a list of exchanged Union prisoners. The commanding officer there was General S. E. Chamberlain, formerly of my regiment, who asked me to remain as his guest for the afternoon and assist in raising a flag on a staff just erected. I did so, returning to Washington later, reaching my room at 8 P. M. Being very tired I was abed by ten o'clock. My cousin, Dr. A. R. Gleason, an assistant surgeon at the Campbell General Hospital, had arranged with me to go to Ford's Theater that night; but as I was so late in returning he went alone, leaving a ticket for me and a note to join him at the theater; but I felt too tired to go. So near did I come to being a witness of the horrible event of which I was so soon to hear.

I had but just got to sleep when someone pounded on my door and woke me. I recognized Sharp's voice saying "Get up and let me in,

quick." I got out of bed, turned up the light and opened the door, when he and several others rushed in. I saw by their white, scared faces that something serious had happened, and Sharp exclaimed, " Major, Lincoln is murdered, Seward dead or dying, and the other members of the Cabinet assaulted, how badly I don't know. You and I can help in this matter better than anybody, so get into your clothes and come with me to General Augur's headquarters as quick as you can." I did.

When we reached Pennsylvania Avenue we found it crowded by a shouting mob, swearing vengeance on the unknown assassin. I heard several men named, but I don't recollect that Booth was among them. It took a long time to reach General Augur's, and when we arrived we found everybody excited, and confusion reigning. If there was any cool-headed man there he was not in sight—nor is it to be wondered at, the shock was so great the mind was dazed and numb.

I went at once into a small room where several officers were holding some sort of conference, told them all I knew about the persons suspected, and advised the arrest of Weichman and everyone found at the Surratt house, which should be searched at once. I also asked for a cavalry squad to go with me to the Surratt place in Maryland, as I thought the assassin would escape that way.

But they thought I could be of more assistance in Washington than in pursuit of Booth, who by that time was known to be the assassin. Sometime towards morning I was allowed to go back to my room, and early in the morning I went to the office, where I found confusion, no work doing and all discussing the calamity. Asking for Weichman I was told he had not been there; but at about ten he came, in the custody of a cavalry officer, to borrow a pair of shoes—as his were low-cut so we could go with a cavalry detail into Charles County, Maryland, to the Surratt farm—" Booth had gone across the bridge east from Washington and they hoped to catch him before he escaped into the enemy's lines."

So the authorities had lost twelve hours and then decided to do exactly what they had refused me the night before. The identical plan I proposed was now adopted—but much valuable time had been lost.

On Tuesday, the 18th, I was summoned before a Court of Inquiry

at General Ingram's headquarters, and gave my testimony. Weichman was arrested and sent to the Old Capitol prison. I had a long talk with him, and told him to tell the truth and nothing else. He promised to, and did; it was through his evidence alone that the conviction of the conspirators was secured.

How Booth escaped, how he was tracked, found, and killed—all these are matters of familiar history—as also how John Surratt escaped to Canada, thence to Italy, where he joined the Papal Zouaves, was detected, arrested, brought back, tried, but acquitted. He settled in Baltimore and practiced law there until his death.

Weichman was long in the employ of the Government and died in Anderson, Indiana, June 5, 1902.

D. H. L. GLEASON.

NATICK, MASS.