

Lew Wallace

An Autobiography

A Visit to Illinois

Mr. Voorhees came to my office one day.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Well, it is the same with me; so I propose we chip in and hire a horse and buggy and go to Danville."

The reference was Danville, Illinois.

"What's going on there?"

"Court is in session --that's all."

We reached the town about dusk and stopped at the tavern. The bar-room, when we entered it after supper, was all a-squeeze with residents, spiced with parties to suits pending, witnesses, and jurors...At last, within the zone of sight, this was what we saw: In front of us a spacious pioneer fireplace all aglow with a fire scientifically built. On the right of the fireplace sat three of the best story-tellers of Indiana, Edward A. Hannegan, Dan Mace, and John Pettit. Opposite them, a broad brick hearth intervening, were two strangers to me whom inquiry presently identified as famous lawyers and yarn-spinners of Illinois...

The criss-crossing went on till midnight, and for a long time it might not be said whether Illinois or Indiana was ahead. There was one of the contestants, however, who arrested my attention early, partly by his stories, partly by his appearance. Out of the mist of years he comes to me now exactly as he appeared then. His hair was thick, coarse, and defiant; it stood out in every direction. His features were massive, nose long, eyebrows protrusive, mouth large, cheeks hollow, eyes gray and always responsive to the humor. He smiled all the time, but never once did he laugh outright. His hands were large, his arms slender and disproportionately long. His legs were a wonder, particularly when he was in narration; he kept crossing and uncrossing them; sometimes it actually seemed he was trying to tie them into a bow-knot. His dress was more than plain; no part of it fit him. His shirt collar had come from the home laundry innocent of starch. The black cravat about his neck persisted in an ungovernable affinity with his left ear. Altogether I thought him the gauntest, quaintest, and most positively ugly man who had ever attracted me enough to call

for study. Still, when he was in speech, my eyes did not quit his face. He held me in unconsciousness. About midnight his competitors were disposed to give in; either their stories were exhausted, or they were tacitly conceding him the crown. From answering them story for story, he gave two or three to their one. At last he took the floor and held it. And looking back, I am now convinced that he frequently invented his replications; which is saying he possessed a marvellous gift of improvisation. Such was Abraham Lincoln. And to be perfectly candid, had one stood at my elbow that night in the old tavern and whispered: "Look at him closely. He will one day be president and the savior of his country," I had laughed at the idea but a little less heartily than I laughed at the man. Afterwards I came to know him better, and then I did not laugh.

Lincoln-Douglas Debates

At Ottawa, Mr. Douglas had presented a number of questions to Mr. Lincoln, which that gentleman answered at the Freeport meeting and countered by interrogatories on his side. It resulted that when the two came to Charleston the issues between them were all joined.

When time was called--if I may use the expression--Mr. Lincoln arose, straightening himself as well as he could. But for the benignant eyes, a more unattractive man I had never seen thus the centre of regard by so many people. His voice was clear without being strong. He was easy and perfectly self-possessed. The great audience received him in utter silence, and the July sun beat mercilessly upon his bare head.

Now, not having been blessed with a vision of the events to come, which were to set this uncouth person in a niche high up alongside Washington, leaving it debatable which of the two is greatest, I confess I inwardly laughed at him; only the laugh was quite as much at the political manager who had led him out against Mr. Douglas. Nevertheless, I gave him attention. Ten minutes--I quit laughing. He was getting hold of me. The pleasantries, the sincerity, the confidence, the amazingly original way of putting things, and the simple, unrestrained manner withal, were doing their perfect work; and then and there I dropped an old theory, that to be a speaker one must needs be graceful and handsome. Twenty minutes--I was listening breathlessly, and with a scarcely defined fear. I turned from him to Mr. Douglas frequently, wondering if the latter could indeed be so superior to this enemy as to answer and overcome him. Thirty minutes--the house divided against itself was looming up more than a figure of speech. My God, could it be prophetic! An hour--the limit of the speech. Mr. Lincoln took his seat. How many souls sat down with him--that is, how many of the unbelieving like myself were converted to his thinking--I could not know; yet of one thing I was assured --it was in somebody's intention to do the old government to death, and slavery was to be the excuse for the crime. Nor could I get from under a conviction that Mr. Lincoln's speech was a defence of Freedom.

Then Mr. Douglas arose. As his stumpy figure appeared, provoking comparison with his tall rival, I was amused thinking, what if in an alignment of company they should be required to dress right or left upon each other? He had an hour and a half for reply. Despite my predilections, I was driven shortly to acknowledge that the prepossession did not belong to him. His face was darkened by a deepening scowl, and he was angry; and in a

situation like his anger is always an admission in the other party's favor. He spoke so gutturally, also, that it was difficult to understand him. Still he was my Gamaliel. From him I had my politics. He failed to draw me like his competitor; he had no magnetism; he was a mind all logic; at the same time, be it said in truth, Stephen A. Douglas could not make a poor speech. I listened almost prayerfully. Whereas Mr. Lincoln had been the fine flower of courtesy, Mr. Douglas made no return in kind. He was handicapped by a continuous terror lest he should say something that would lose him the support of the South in the vastly more important convention then shortly to be held at Charleston, South Carolina. I did not stay to hear him through, but left carrying with me a damaging contrast--while Mr. Lincoln had been the advocate of Freedom, Mr. Douglas, with all his genius for discussion, had not been able to smother the fact that he was indirectly and speciously acknowledging all the South claimed for slavery.

So Lincoln came into my view a second time...

Ben-Hur

General Wallace has given this detailed account of the writing of *Ben-Hur*:

"How came I to write *Ben-Hur*?"

"The question has been put to me so often, and in the same form, that the world shall have an answer; although I confess it not a little difficult, seeing the different aims the interrogation may take.

"The very beginning of the book lies in a quotation from St. Matthew:

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is He that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the east, and are come to worship Him.'

"Far back as my memory goes of things read by or to me, those lines took a hold on my imagination beyond every other passage of Scripture. How simple they are! But analyze them, and behold the points of wonder!

"The saying that they came from the east is altogether unsatisfactory. How many were they? And oh, the star! the star!

"It was a speaking star, for we are left to infer it told them a king was born to the Jews, and that they must go find and worship Him; and when, doubtless, they asked where He was, they were bid follow it, for it was the King's star. So, too, it could not have been set in the heavens, else it could not have led them; for one may go round the globe, and up and down from pole to pole, without ever getting under the far pin-point of light called the north star.

"Then when, after months and possibly years of journey to and fro, on ship or horse or camel, bearing presents of value--they could not have walked--how did they know their journey at last finished?

"And when they entered a cave near an obscure hamlet, Bethlehem by name, and beheld a speechless baby in swaddling-clothes, and nowise different in appearance from other babies, who told them it was He they were seeking? What, a king in a stable-manger!

"But they did not laugh; they stopped there and worshipped the little boy, and gave Him their gifts. Was the mother astonished, or was she looking for them?

"In 1875--the date is given from best recollection--when I was getting over the